

### Two Greek City-States: Athens and Sparta

From 1000 to 800 BCE many small city-states began to develop throughout Greece. These city-states were independent of one another and were separated by geographic boundaries. Wars were constantly being fought over territory and since there was no central government to stop them, the wars continued for centuries. These wars allowed some city-states to become more powerful than others. The two most powerful were Athens and Sparta.

#### Sparta

Sparta was a collection of villages and agricultural lands on the Peloponnese peninsula, inland from the sea and surrounded by mountains. Sparta was about a 100 miles from Athens. It was a city-state ruled by Dorian Greeks who had conquered local farmers who became known as Helots, which are serfs and slaves. The Spartans had made themselves the ruling aristocracy over the Helots, who outnumbered the Spartans seven to one. The Helots apparently suffered the consequences of military weakness; the peoples of farming communities such as theirs are traditionally less warlike and more pastoral.

Sparta's economy was almost entirely agriculture, with only a few craftsmen and tradesmen. Spartans saw themselves as warriors and looked upon trade and commerce as beneath their dignity. Each Spartan family had an allotment of land and managed Helots that came with their property, and they took half of what the Helots produced. With land divided equally among them, and not allowed to sell their land, no great disparity in wealth arose among the Spartans. And without a disparity in wealth, kingship did not become the property of a single family. Nor could there be an oligarchy of the rich. Instead, among the Spartans rule remained with popularly selected kings—two of them. Power was divided between the sea body of elders, the two kings and five Ephors who oversaw legality of the land.

Without a division in wealth among the Spartans, there was greater stability among them than with the peoples of other Greek cities. But the enslavement of Helots was a source of trouble. Occasionally the Helots revolted, and the Spartans suppressed the revolts with bloody reprisals. To guard against plots of the Helots, the Spartans created a secret police, and Spartans could kill a Helot if they were suspicious of him. Being greatly outnumbered by Helots, as well as needing to defend themselves from outsiders, the Spartans saw their ability to wage war as paramount in preserving their way of life. And having the Helots to labor for them, the Spartans were able to devote a good portion of their lives to training for warfare. Being a warrior was a job of glamour in Sparta, and young men hoped for the drama of military action. From the age of seven the Spartans reared their sons as warriors, putting them in barracks and giving them rigorous physical training—until the age of thirty. Respecting strength, discipline and equality among themselves, the Spartans forbade themselves luxuries, including possessing wealth in the form of silver or gold.

Sparta's concern for strength and discipline extended to Spartan women, who enjoyed a status uncommon elsewhere in Greece. Not understanding genetics, the Spartans believed that females who became physically strong through exercise passed these acquired characteristics to their children. So to breed a physically strong and healthy progeny, girls and young women were trained in gymnastics. Also to maintain their success and way of life, the Spartans forbade any among them to travel abroad or receive visitations by outsiders. Sparta was a closed society, void of the stimulations of travel that had contributed to the creativity found in other Greek cities. Philosophy and critical literature would not develop in Sparta as elsewhere among the Greeks, but the Spartans did enjoy music and choral poetry, and every year the Spartans held a festival of poetry in honor of the god Apollo.