

Ancient Greece: The rise of city-states Athens and Sparta

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The Panachaiko Mountains of Greece. The high mountains of Greece made it difficult for separate city-states to communicate. As a result, two city-states in ancient Greece could be quite different from each another. Photo from: Wikimedia Commons.

Geography plays a big role in how civilizations grow and change. Ancient Greece, the Greece of long ago, is one good example of this.

The Greek peninsula has two geographic features that influenced how Greek society developed. First, Greece has easy access to water. The land contains countless scattered islands, deep harbors and a network of small rivers. This would have made traveling to and from Greece by ship easy. Because of that, the ancient Greeks might naturally become explorers and traders.

Second, Greece has very mountainous terrain. This led to the development of the city-state, or polis, in ancient Greece. A polis is a city that governs itself independently, like a tiny country. City-states began to develop around 750 B.C.E. That was about 2,800 years ago. Greece's high mountains made it very difficult for people to travel or communicate. Therefore, each polis developed independently. They were often very different from one another. Athens and Sparta are two good examples of city-states that contrasted greatly with each other.

Athenians Loved Knowledge And Shared Power Among People

The city-state of Athens was the birthplace of many world-changing ideas. Ancient Athenians were a thoughtful people. They enjoyed studying science and history. They were especially famous for their love of philosophy, the study of knowledge.

Athenians felt that art, architecture and literature were very important. They built thousands of temples and statues. By looking at them, we can tell what the idea of "beauty" meant to them. Their sense of style is now called "classical," and it is still seen today in art and buildings. Athenians also enjoyed a form of government called a democracy, in which some of the people share power.



Spartan Citizens Trained To Become Hardened Soldiers

Life in Sparta was entirely different from life in Athens. The city-state of Sparta was located in the southern part of Greece on the Peloponnisos peninsula. It was ruled by two kings and an oligarchy, or a small group of people that held political power. Every part of Spartan life was influenced by the military.

Early in Sparta's history, Spartan slaves rose up against their masters. This event caused the Spartans to change their society. A Spartan named Lycurgus wrote a harsh set of laws that required people to be completely dedicated to their city. The idea was to train citizens to become hardened soldiers so that they could fight off any future enemy. The result was a rigid lifestyle. It was unlike any seen in Greece at the time. The Spartans were so obsessed with their military, they had little time for the arts or literature.

A Spartan baby had to be strong and healthy. Spartan parents would leave their child on a mountain overnight to see if it could survive on its own until the next morning. This was to test the baby's strength. By age 7, Spartan boys were taken from their families. They underwent tough military training. They wore uniforms at all times, ate small meals of tasteless foods and exercised barefoot to toughen their feet. Disobedient behavior meant punishment. Boys lived away from their families until the age of 30, even after they were married. Men were expected to be ready to serve in the army until they were 60 years old.



Women also had to be loyal to their city-state. Like men, they followed a strict exercise program. Spartan women were not allowed to vote, but they usually had more rights and freedoms than women in other Greek city-states.

Differences Between Athens And Sparta Led To 30-Year War

The differences between Athens and Sparta eventually led to war. It was known as the Peloponnesian War, and it lasted nearly 30 years. Both Sparta and Athens teamed up with other city-states to do battle, but no single city-state was strong enough to destroy all the others. That is why the war went on for so long.

With war came death and misfortune. Both sides suffered disease and hunger.

Even so, war cannot kill ideas. Athens eventually surrendered and lost the war, but Athenian beliefs like democracy spread throughout the region. After some short-term setbacks, these ideas became widely accepted. They became even more important over the centuries.

Quiz

1 Read the summary of the article. Choose the sentence that BEST goes into the blank to complete the summary.

Ancient Greece was divided into different city-states, cities with their own individual governments.

_____.

The differences between the two were so great that they eventually led to the Peloponnesian War.

- (A) The people of Athens valued knowledge and artwork, while the Spartans were heavily influenced by the military and training for war.
- (B) The Spartans wanted their babies to be healthy and strong, so they would leave their children alone on a mountain.
- (C) The people of Athens began to develop city-states on the scattered islands of Greece and communication there was easy.
- (D) The Spartans invented the form of government that many countries around the world, including the U.S., use today: democracy.

2 What effect did a historical slave uprising have on Sparta?

- (A) After the attack, Spartans decided to shift their government from a democracy to an oligarchy.
- (B) After the attack, women were no longer allowed to vote or participate in society.
- (C) After the attack, Spartans wrote strict laws that made everyone in the city become dedicated fighters.
- (D) After the attack, Sparta entered a war and began to suffer from disease and hunger.

3 Select the sentence from the article that BEST shows that the Athenians were a thoughtful people.

- (A) Athens and Sparta are two good examples of city-states that contrasted greatly with each other.
- (B) They were especially famous for their love of philosophy, the study of knowledge.
- (C) They built thousands of temples and statues.
- (D) Even so, war cannot kill ideas.

4 Which paragraph in "Spartan Citizens Trained To Become Hardened Soldiers" BEST supports the idea that daily life for Spartans was challenging?