

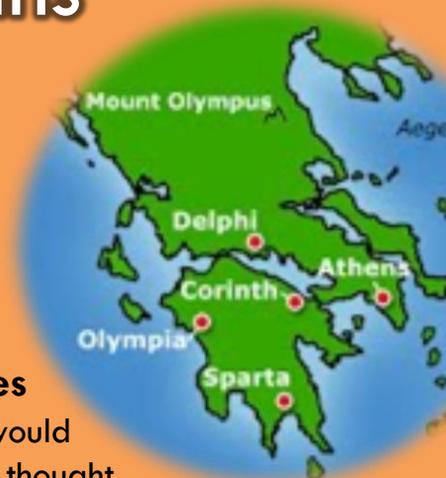
# Meet the Spartans

## This is Sparta!

Sparta was a **city state** of Ancient Greece. They called the area **Lacedaemon** and the main city was called Sparta. In myth, they were named after King Lacedaemon, who was descended from Zeus, and Queen Sparti, the daughter of a river god.



**Ancient ruins of Sparta**



## City States

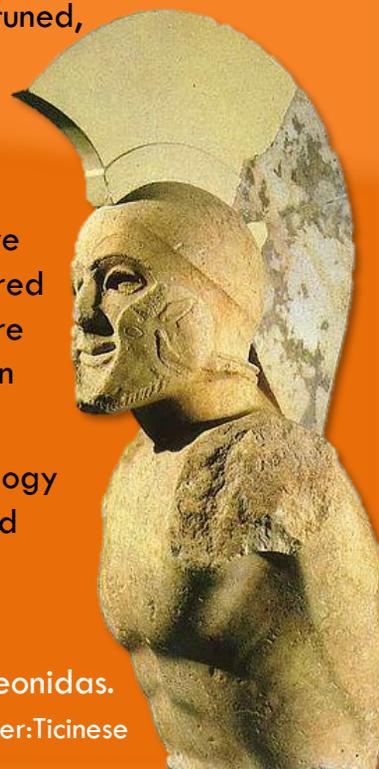
Nobody would have thought of themselves as 'Greek' in ancient times. The country was split into city states that had their own identities. Some city states you might have heard of were **Athens, Delphi, Olympia** and **Corinth**. The Spartans considered anyone who was not from Sparta to be 'foreign'.

## Warriors

All Spartan men were expected to be soldiers. Boys left home at the age of 7 to join a strict program of training at military school, called the **agoge**. They were expected to compete against each other, taught to steal without getting caught, and learnt many key survival skills. Through this tough training, Spartan males would become fine tuned, elite warriors who had excellent self discipline and prized their community. From age 20, Spartan males were considered full time soldiers and would remain in military service until they were 60.

Spartan warriors supposedly used shorter swords, as they were brave enough to get closer to their enemy. They fought in full armour with red cloaks and were famous for their long hair, which they combed before battle. To die in battle was the most honourable way to die; only men who died in battle were given a named gravestone.

Although the Spartans were known for their warrior culture, archaeology in Sparta has revealed much more. Sparta had a thriving bronze and ivory industry. It also produced fine pottery that was exported to Italy. A class of free non-Spartans, called the **Períoikoi**, would have made these items.



Marble statue of a Spartan warrior, maybe Leonidas.  
Archeological Museum of Sparta. Image: Benutzer:Ticinese

## Kings and Councils

Sparta had two kings at a time so that if one died in battle there would not be an argument of who was in charge. The Kings were more like military leaders. A council made up of the 2 Kings and 28 elders (aged over 60) made most of the decisions. A group of 5 men called **ephors** also led the city state alongside the 2 kings.

One of the most famous Spartan Kings was **Leonidas**. He was famous for leading the Greek army against **Xerxes and his Persian army** at the battle of **Thermopylae**. He sacrificed himself and his small bodyguard of 300 men at the battle to save the rest of the Greek army. He was celebrated as a hero for his bravery. On the next page you can read some of the things he said.

## Spartan Women

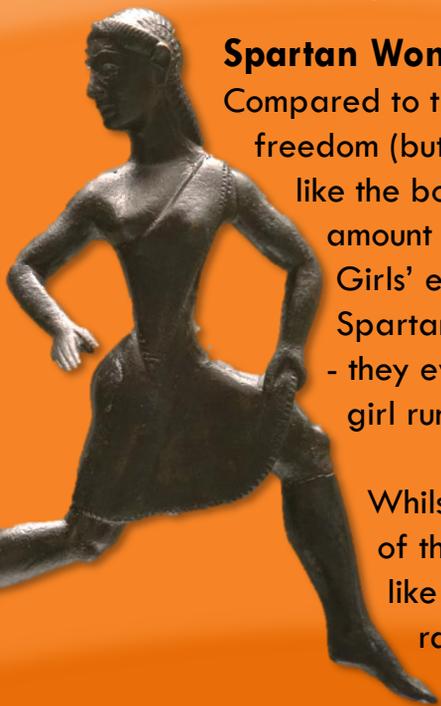
Compared to the lives of women in other city states, Spartan women had more freedom (but not by modern standards). Growing up, they got an education like the boys, they were not forced to marry at 14, and they got the same amount of food as boys (which didn't happen in other city states).

Girls' education mostly focused on music, dance and poetry. Unmarried Spartan women were encouraged to stay fit and take part in sport - they even wrestled! The image on the left is a figurine of a Spartan girl running.

Whilst their husbands were away fighting, the women were in charge of their homes. They were not expected to do typically female jobs like weaving and cleaning. Spartan women had one job to do: raise warriors. They took this very seriously and took great pride in their brave sons. Women who died in childbirth were given the same honour as men who died in battle.

## The Helots

The Spartans conquered their own neighbours, the Messenians, and made them their slaves, or **serfs** (somewhere between a slave and free). They were known as the 'Helots' and did all the manual labour and farming so that Spartan men could focus on being soldiers. The Helots were often cruelly mistreated and many were killed. The Helots did have some freedom – they could live in their own family units, marry who they liked and could keep a portion of what they grew. They could also earn their release.



Ruins of a theatre at Sparta

# Sayings of the Spartans

We do not have much evidence from the Spartans themselves but other Greeks were very interested in their unusual ways and Plutarch wrote down some of the things they said.

Leonidas during the battle of Thermopylae:

When someone said, "Because of the arrows of the enemy it is impossible to see the sun," Leonidas said, **"Won't it be nice, then, to have shade in which to fight them?"**

When his enemy Xerxes wrote to him "Hand over your weapons," he wrote back, daring him to **"Come and take them."**

*Knowing they were likely to die, he told his soldiers to eat a big breakfast because they would be eating their dinner in the other world that night.*

It wasn't just the men who were brave and valued a noble death in battle, the Spartan women were pretty tough too:

A mother was burying her son, when an old woman came up to her and said, "Ah the bad luck of it, you poor woman." **"No"** said she, **"but good luck; for I bore him that he might die for Sparta, and this is the very thing that has come to pass for me."**

Another said **"Let the poor cowards be mourned, but, with never a tear do I bury you, my son, who are mine, and are Sparta's as well."**

Disappointed to hear her son had run away from the enemy, a mother wrote to him, **"Ill report is spread about you; either clear yourself of this or stop yer living."**

How would you feel if your own mother said these things about you?



ΜΟΛΟΝ  
ΛΑΒΕ

A statue of Leonidas at the site of the battle of Thermopylae. The engraving says 'molon labe' which means 'come and take them'.