

Arete, Spartan Style: **Military Preparedness and Austerity**

By the sixth century B.C.E. Sparta and Athens were the two most powerful city-states in the Hellenic world. They demonstrate two different ways of life. Spartans set an example of military superiority. Athenians excelled in politics and intellectual activities. In both city-states, people gave their loyalty to the polis rather than to their families. Both honored human excellence (*arete*), but they defined it differently.

We have already noted that the Dorians who settled Sparta, like their Aryan cousins in India, tried to keep totally separate from the farmers who had been living there. Sparta used military might to control the helots (non-Spartans) and was perhaps the only place in Greece where Dorian invaders continued to stay completely segregated from the earlier inhabitants.

Lycurgus was a legendary early leader of Sparta. Tradition claims that when people asked him to establish a democracy, he replied, "Begin by setting it up in your own family." Lycurgus is credited with writing a constitution that provided for two kings who shared power, performed the sacrifices, supervised justice, and commanded the army. A senate of older men passed whatever laws were needed, served as a supreme court, and formulated public policy. An assembly, composed of all male citizens over thirty, met when the moon was full to consent to the laws and elect five overseers. Sparta also had a powerful secret police that spied on helots and had the right to kill any helot who might be a threat to the polis.

STRATEGIES TO CREATE BRAVE WARRIORS

The ideal Spartan was a totally dedicated and selflessly brave warrior. Men boasted that their city did not need walls, claiming they were its defense. Elders examined newborn babies, and those that were too weak or deformed to make good soldiers or become mothers of good soldiers were left exposed to die or thrown to their death.

To encourage loyalty to the group rather than to one's family, young Spartan boys left their homes when they were seven years old and lived in barracks, training with other youths until they were thirty. For thirty more years, they shared one meal a day with the other men. Men started serving in the army when they were twenty and remained until they were sixty. A Spartan soldier was to "come home carrying his shield or on it," but he was never to surrender. In fact, to die in battle was considered the highest honor. Only Spartan men who died in battle and women who died in childbirth had their names on their graves.

The goal of Spartan education for boys was to train ideal fighters. Reading and writing were unimportant; laws were shared orally. Spartans considered art and literature worse than a waste of time because they might weaken one's resolve. Health was a virtue, while sickness was a crime. It was acceptable to be cunning as long as one did not get caught. Boys fought and shunned those who showed pain or cowardliness. Most young boys had male lovers but men were also encouraged to marry, and celibacy was a crime. The usual age for marriage was eighteen, even though young men did not live with their wives until they were thirty. Bachelors could not vote, and women made fun of them and even beat them up.

Spartans did not welcome visitors from other city-states who might bring disquieting new ideas. Few Spartans wanted to travel because they did not believe they had anything to learn from the outside world. To limit the number of outsiders who might bring new ideas, Spartans prohibited importing gold and silver and required merchants to use iron currency in all transactions. The iron bars were too heavy to store or use easily as a means of exchange, so not much trade took place. Spartan men had little personal wealth, and they gave each boy only one shirt. (When we say someone lives a Spartan life, we usually mean he or she has few possessions.)

Spartans told about a youth who had befriended a baby fox and raised it secretly as a pet. Because boys were forbidden to have personal possessions and were not supposed to feel sentiment, he told no one about his companion. One day, while playing with his pet, the boy was called to drill. Caught unaware, he quickly hid the animal in his shirt as he stood at attention. In the confusion and noise of the drill procedure, the fox became frightened and began to claw the boy's chest. The lad, true to Spartan values, did not even flinch until he fell over dead, his stomach torn open by the

claws of the terrified animal.

WHAT ABOUT SPARTAN WOMEN?

Spartan women were taught to take pride in being mothers of heroes. Elders encouraged young girls to participate in the games so they would develop strong bodies, and they were well fed so they would give birth to healthy babies. Their education included training in gymnastics and music as well as in household management and child rearing. Hoping the wives of its citizens would have lots of babies, Spartans over-looked extra-marital affairs as long as both partners were healthy Spartans. If a woman were childless, she could get a divorce and marry again in the hopes that she and her new partner would have a son.

Stories reflect the values women were expected to have. Imagine a Spartan woman who, having sent five sons off to war, waits anxiously for news of the battle. She asks a returning soldier how things have gone, and he tells her that all five of her sons have been killed. She replies, "I did not ask about that! How fares the country?" When she hears that Sparta has been victorious, she replies, "Then I accept gladly also the death of my sons." Another mother, we are told, was burying her son when an old woman said to her: "Ah, the bad luck of it. Poor woman." But the mother replied, "No; by heaven, hut 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." (Quotations from Plutarch) We can ponder whether mothers were really this anxious for their sons to die in battle. As Sappho wrote:

Death is our evil. The gods believe this,
or else by now they themselves would be dead.

Spartan women had the reputation in the rest of Greece for being strong, beautiful, and outspoken, and they may have fared better than women in other city-states. Since Spartans did not intermarry with helots, Spartan men had little reason to distrust the women they married. That may help explain the higher status and greater independence of Spartan women compared with the rest of Greece. In addition, because their husbands had to spend so much of their lives in the barracks, Spartan women had almost total control of their lives and households.

Arete, Athenian Style: **Direct Democracy by the Citizens**

Athens is in Attica on a southeastern edge of the Balkan Peninsula. Athens also emerged from the Dark Age as an oligarchy dominated by a hereditary aristocracy, a group of landowners whose status and wealth came from their land. The aristocrats made up the Council of Elders that passed laws governing the city.

Athens had no helots, so wealthy landowners hired other Athenians to do the farm work. Poor Athenian farmers who had no political rights and little chance to improve their lives soon began to resent working for landowners who had all the political power. Why not, litany asked, pack up and emigrate to a new settlement along the Black Sea or the southern coast of the Italian Peninsula where they could get land and have a say in the government? As colonists, they might become the aristocrats.

Merchants also envied the aristocracy. Trade was important in Athens, and the number of rich, urban, self-made businessmen was increasing. They resented the fact that even though they were wealthy, they had little social status or authority. They began to challenge the aristocracy's hereditary claim to political power.

While merchants were getting richer, many farmers were getting poorer and sinking into debt. When (hey were unable to pay hack their loans, they lost their land. A few found work in Athens; many wandered around as unemployed or underemployed laborers. Some even put themselves and their families up as collateral for loans, and when they could not pay back the loans, they became the moneylenders' debt-slaves. These formerly self-sufficient farmers were left with no land, work, or income.

Revolt and even revolution threatened the aristocrats who ruled Athens. In other city-states where similar situations existed, the poor were turning to tyrants. (Although these tyrants ruled with absolute power, their supporters thought they were reformers who would reduce the power of the wealthy landowners.) Fearing Athens would also turn to a popular tyrant, in 591 B.C.E. the Council of Elders asked Solon to make whatever reforms he thought were necessary to prevent trouble. Although Solon had become a rich businessman, his sympathies were with the poor, so

each class grudgingly accepted him as the best hope.