

Chapter 27

Life in Two City-States: Athens and Sparta

What were the major differences between Athens and Sparta?

27.1 Introduction

In this chapter, you will learn about two of the most important Greek city-states, Athens and Sparta. They had different forms of government. Their citizens also had very different ways of life.

Athens was a walled city near the sea. Close by, ships came and went from a busy port supporting trade. Inside the city walls of Athens, talented master potters and sculptors labored in workshops. Wealthy Athenians and their slaves strolled through the marketplace. Citizenship was enjoyed by free men. Often, the city's citizens gathered to loudly debate the issues of the day.

Sparta was located in a fertile farming area on an inland plain. No walls surrounded the city. Its buildings were simple compared with those of Athens. The same was true about the clothes worn by the people. Spartan soldiers wore stern expressions behind their bronze helmets as they marched in columns through the streets.

Even a casual visitor would have noticed that Athens and Sparta were very different. Let's take a closer look at the way people lived in these two city-states. We will examine each city's government, economy, education, and treatment of women and slaves to discover how they differed.



The art on this graceful Athenian jar shows the harvesting of olives.

◀ Fierce Spartan terra-cotta masks were used in worship.

Athens a city-state of ancient Greece that was first to have a democracy; also known as the birthplace of Western civilization; the capital of present-day Greece

Sparta a city-state of ancient Greece, known for its military oligarchy

Peloponnesus a peninsula forming the southern part of the mainland of Greece

27.2 Comparing Two City-States

Both Athens and Sparta were Greek cities, only about 150 miles apart. Yet they were as different as they could be. Why?

Part of the answer is geography. **Athens** is in central Greece, only four miles from the Aegean Sea. Its location encouraged Athenians to look outward toward the world beyond the city. Athenians liked to travel. They were eager to spread their own ideas and to learn from others. They encouraged artists from other parts of Greece to come and share their knowledge of art and architecture. Athens developed strong relationships with other city-states, and it grew large and powerful through trade. A great fleet made it the leading naval power in Greece.

In contrast, **Sparta** was more isolated. It was located on a narrow plain on a peninsula in southern Greece known as the **Peloponnesus** (pel-uh-puh-NEE-suh). Sparta was surrounded on three sides by mountains, and its harbor was about

25 miles away. Spartans were suspicious of outsiders and their ideas. They could already grow much of what they needed in the fertile soil around Sparta. What they could not grow, Sparta's powerful armies would often take by force from their neighbors. While Athenians boasted of their art and culture, Spartans valued simplicity and strength. They taught their sons and daughters to fight, and they were proud to produce soldiers rather than artists and thinkers.

For most of their histories, these two city-states were bitter rivals. As you will see, the major differences between Athens and Sparta were reflected in almost every part of life.

The locations of the ancient city-states of Athens and Sparta help to explain their many differences.

27.3 Athenian Government

Athens became a democracy around 500 B.C.E. But unlike modern democracies, Athens allowed only free men to be citizens. All Athenian-born men over the age of 18 were considered Athenian citizens. Women and slaves were not permitted citizenship.

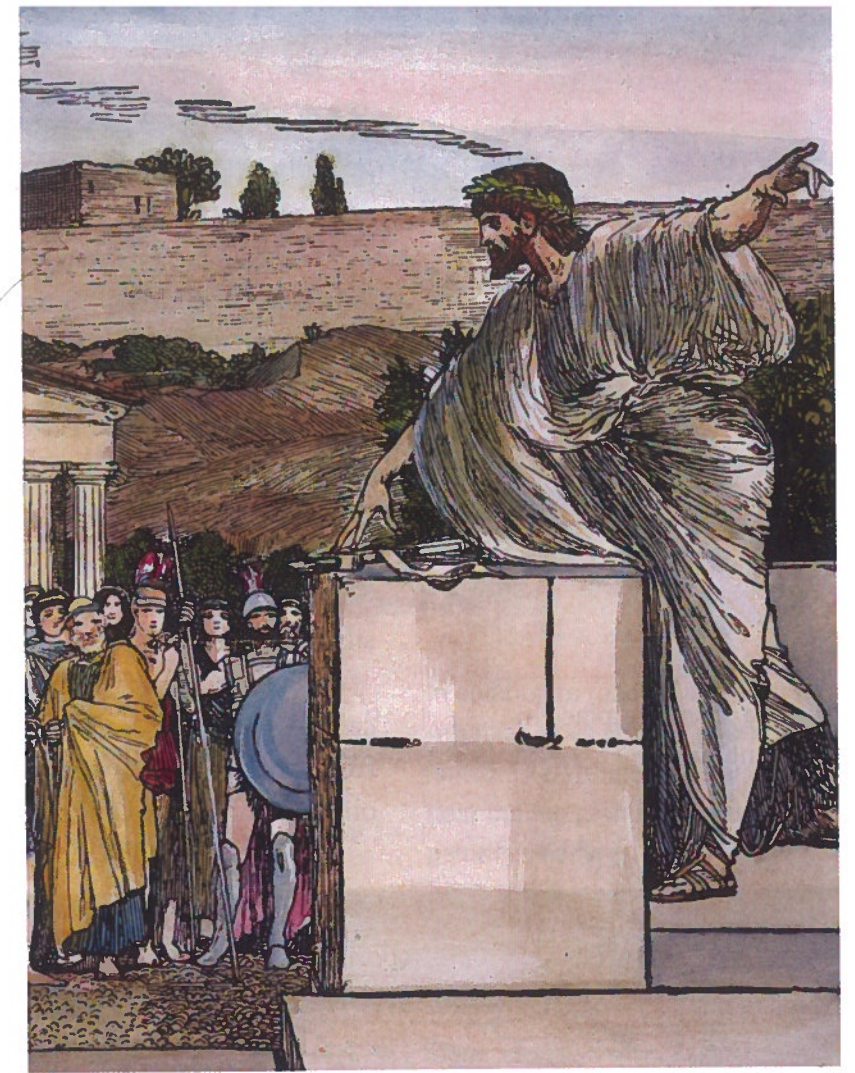
Every citizen could take part in the city's government. A group called the **Council of 500** met every day. Each year, the names of all citizens 30 years of age or older were collected. Then, 500 citizens were **selected** to be on the council. The council ran the daily business of government and suggested new laws.

Proposed laws had to be approved by a much larger group, the Assembly of Athens.

The Assembly met on a hill every ten days. According to law, at least 6,000 citizens had to be present for a meeting to take place. If fewer people attended a meeting, slaves armed with ropes dipped in red paint would be sent out to round up more citizens. Athenian men were said to be embarrassed to appear in red-stained clothes at these meetings.

The Assembly debated issues and voted on laws proposed by the council. Every citizen had the right to speak at Assembly meetings. Some speakers were more skilled than others. Some spoke longer than others. A water clock was sometimes used to time a speaker. It worked by placing a cup filled with water above another cup. The top cup had a small hole drilled into the bottom. A speaker was permitted to talk only during the time it took for all the water in the top cup to drain into the bottom cup.

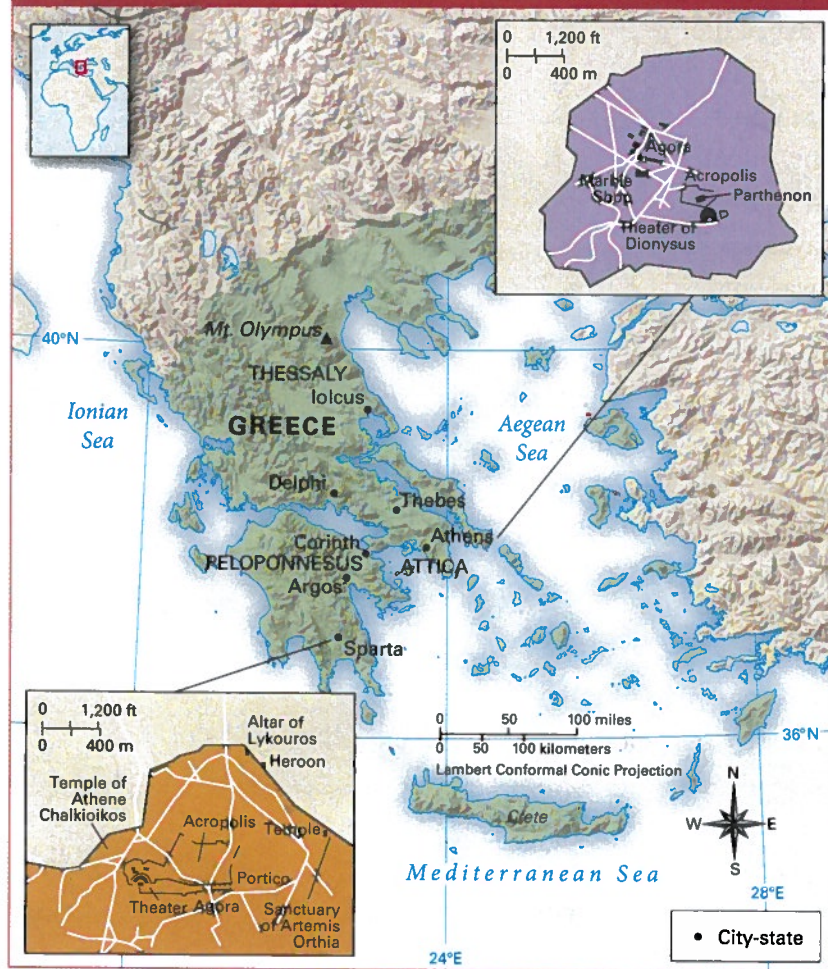
Most Athenian men enjoyed taking part in the city's democratic government. They liked to gather and debate the issues. They were proud of their freedom as Athenian citizens.



The Granger Collection, New York

Demosthenes, an Athenian leader, speaks to the Assembly.

Athens and Sparta, About 500 B.C.E.



Council of 500 in Athens, a group of 500 citizens chosen to form a council responsible for running the day-to-day business of government

27.4 Athenian Economy

An important part of life in any community is its economy. An economy is the way in which a community or region organizes the manufacture and exchange of money, food, products, and services to meet people's needs.

Because the land around Athens did not provide enough food for all of the city's people, Athens's economy was based on trade. Athens was near the sea, and it had a good harbor. This enabled Athenians to trade with other city-states and with several foreign lands to **obtain** the goods and natural resources they needed. Athenians acquired wood from Italy and grain from Egypt. In exchange, Athenians traded honey, olive oil, silver, and beautifully painted pottery.

agora a marketplace in ancient Greece

Athenians bought and sold goods at a huge marketplace called the **agora** (A-guh-ruh). There, merchants sold their goods from small stands. Athenians bought lettuce, onions, olive oil, and other foods. Shoppers could also buy household

items such as pottery, furniture, and clay oil lamps. Most people in Athens made their clothes at home, but leather sandals and jewelry were popular items at the market. The agora was also the place where the Athenians bought and sold slaves.

Like most other city-states, Athens developed its own coins to make trade easier. Gold, silver, and bronze were some of the metals used to make coins. Athenians decorated the flat sides of their coins. One such coin had an image of the goddess Athena. The other side of the coin pictured Athena's favorite bird, the owl.

Athenians shopped for food and household goods in the agora. The shopper at right on this vase is inspecting a piece of pottery.



27.5 Education in Athens

Athenian democracy depended on having well-prepared citizens. People in Athens believed that producing good citizens was the main purpose of education. Since only boys could grow up to be citizens, boys and girls were educated quite differently.

Athenians believed that a good citizen should have both an intelligent mind and a healthy body. Therefore, book learning and physical training were important. Boys were taught at home by their mothers or male slaves until the age of 6 or 7. Then, boys went to school until about the age of 14. Teachers taught reading, writing, arithmetic, and literature. Because books were rare and very expensive, students had to read subjects out loud and memorize everything. Writing tablets helped boys learn. To build boys' strength, coaches taught sports such as wrestling and gymnastics. Boys also studied music. They learned to sing and to play the lyre, a stringed instrument like a harp.

At 18, Athenian men began their military training. After their army service, wealthy young men might study with private teachers. These teachers charged high fees for lessons in debating and public speaking that would help young men become future political leaders.

Unlike boys, most girls did not learn to read or write. Instead, girls grew up helping their mothers with household tasks. They were taught to cook, clean, spin thread, and weave cloth. Some also learned ancient secret songs and dances performed for religious festivals. Girls usually married around the age of 15. Those from wealthy families married men chosen by their fathers. Girls from poor families often had more choice.

In addition to reading and writing, Athenian boys studied poetry and music. The stringed instrument near the top of this ancient Greek painting is a lyre.

27.6 Women and Slaves in Athens

Only men were considered citizens in Athens. Citizenship was not possible for women and slaves, so they had far fewer rights than free men did.

Women Athenian women could not inherit or own much property. They could not vote or attend the Assembly. Most could not even choose their own husbands.

A few women had jobs. Some women sold goods in the market. A few very important women were priestesses. But most Athenian women had their greatest influence in the home. They spent their days managing the household and raising their children. An Athenian wife had separate rooms at home. Her

responsibilities included spinning, weaving, and supervising the slaves. She never went out alone. She taught her sons until they were about 6 or 7 and ready for school. She educated her daughters until they were 15 and ready to be married.

Slaves There were many slaves in ancient Athens. Most Athenians who weren't poor owned at least one slave. Some people were born into slavery. Others were forced into slavery as captives of war.

Slaves performed a wide variety of jobs in Athens, including tasks that required a great deal of skill. Some ran households and taught Athenian children. A number of slaves were trained as artisans. Others worked on farms or in factories. Some slaves worked for the city as clerks.

Some slaves worked in the silver mines. They might work ten hours a day, in cramped tunnels 300 feet below the surface. They had little air to breathe and were often harshly punished if they stopped to rest.

The women of Athens had their greatest influence in the home.



27.7 Spartan Government

Sparta was different from Athens in almost every way, beginning with its government. While Athens was a democracy, Sparta was an oligarchy. In an oligarchy, the ruling power is in the hands of a few people.

Sparta's government—as well as Spartan society—was dedicated to military strength. Founded in the 800s B.C.E., Sparta was the leading military power in the Mediterranean area until about 370 B.C.E.

Like Athens, Sparta had an Assembly. But the important decisions were actually made by a much smaller group called the **Council of Elders**.

The Council of Elders consisted of two kings and 28 other men. The two kings inherited their position and shared equal powers. The other 28 members of the council were elected by members of the Assembly.

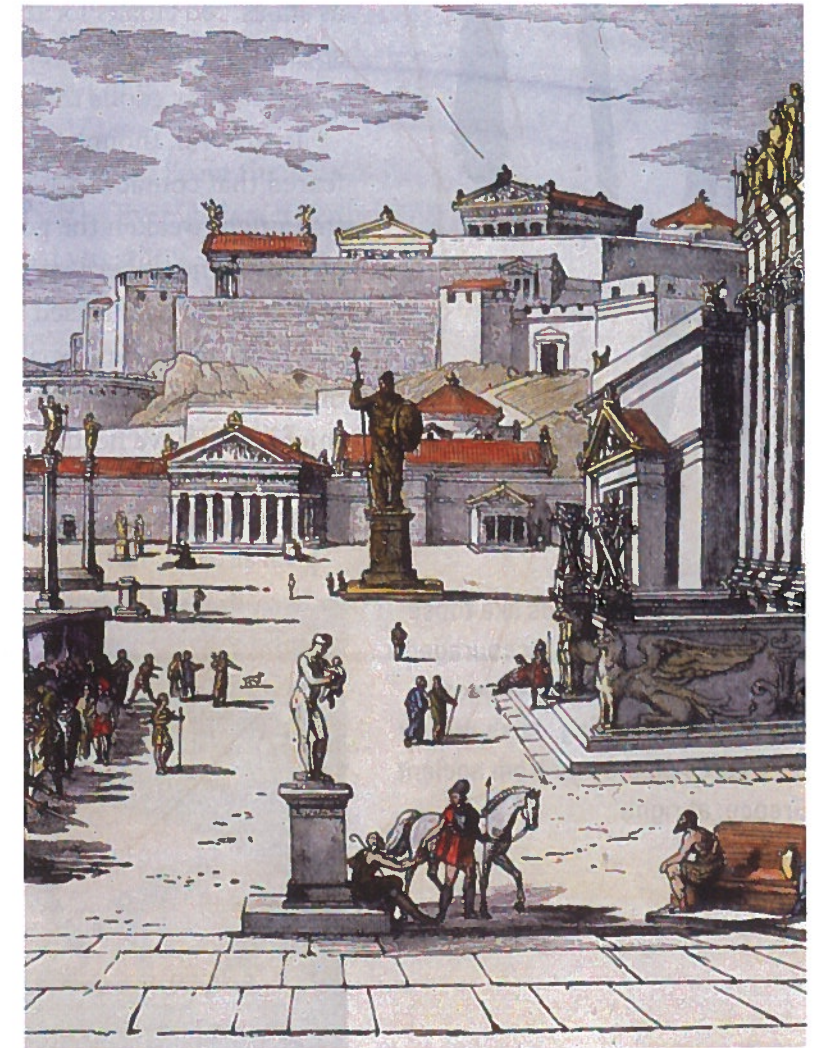
To be elected to the Council of Elders, men had to be at least 60 years old and from a noble family. Some scholars believe that members of the Assembly voted for candidates by shouting. Those men who received the loudest support were elected. Once elected, they served for life.

The Council of Elders held the real power in Sparta. It prepared laws for the Assembly to vote on, and it had the power to stop any laws passed by the Assembly that council members didn't like.

The Assembly in Sparta was made up of male citizens. Because the Assembly was large, it met in a spacious outdoor area away from the center of the city. The Assembly had little power. Unlike the Assembly in Athens, it did not debate issues. Members of the Assembly could only vote yes or no on laws suggested by the Council of Elders.

Council of Elders a small group of Spartans who made all the important governing decisions

The agora in Sparta was a place where people could gather. The men of Sparta often debated government issues there.





27.8 Spartan Economy

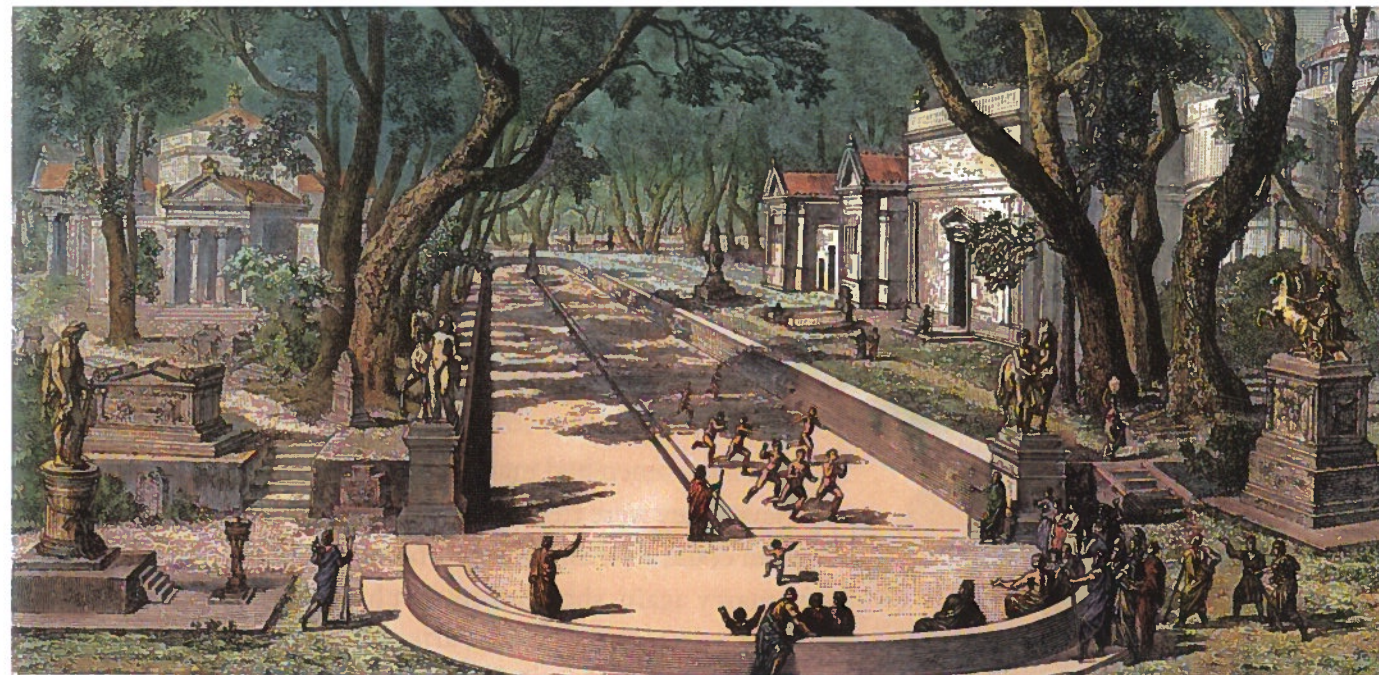
While Athens's economy depended on trade, Sparta's economy relied on farming and on conquests of other people. Although Sparta had fertile soil, there was not enough land to provide food for everyone. When necessary, Spartans took the lands they needed from their neighbors, who were then forced to work for Sparta. Because Spartan men were expected to serve in the army until the age of 60, Sparta had to rely on slaves and noncitizens to produce the goods it lacked.

Conquered villagers became slaves, called helots. The helots were allowed to live in their own villages, but they had to give much of the food they grew to Sparta.

The Spartans also made use of a second group of people—noncitizens who were free. Noncitizens might serve in the army when needed, but they could not take part in Sparta's government. They were responsible for making such necessary items as shoes, red cloaks for the soldiers, iron tools like knives and spears, and pottery. They also conducted some trade with other city-states for goods that Sparta could not provide for itself.

In general, though, Sparta discouraged trade. The Spartans feared that contact with other city-states would lead to new ideas that might weaken the government. Trading with Sparta was already difficult because of its system of money. Rather than use coins, Spartans used heavy iron bars as money. According to legend, an ancient Spartan leader decided to use this form of money to discourage stealing. An iron bar had little value. A thief would have needed to steal a wagonload of bars to make the theft worthwhile. As you might guess, other city-states were not anxious to receive iron as payment for goods.

Spartans used iron rods like those above as money. This discouraged trade. Instead, Sparta's economy depended on farming, as shown by the figures on the cup from ancient Greece, at right.



27.9 Education in Sparta

In Sparta, the purpose of education was to produce **capable** men and women who could fight to protect the city-state. Spartans were likely to **abandon** sickly infants who might not grow up to be strong soldiers.

Spartans highly valued discipline and strength. From the age of 7, all Spartan children trained for battle. Even girls were given some military training. They learned wrestling, boxing, footracing, and gymnastics. Spartan boys lived and trained in buildings called barracks. Boys learned to read and write, but those skills were not considered as essential as military skills.

The most important Spartan goal was to be a brave soldier. Spartan boys were taught to suffer any amount of physical pain without complaining. They marched without shoes. They were not well fed; in fact, they were encouraged to steal food, as long as they did not get caught. One Spartan legend tells of a boy who was so hungry, he stole a fox to eat. But seeing his teacher coming, the boy quickly hid the fox under his cloak. The boy chose to let the fox bite him in the stomach rather than be caught stealing by his teacher.

At about the age of 20, Spartan men were given a difficult test of fitness, military ability, and leadership skills. If they passed, they became Spartan soldiers and full citizens. Even then, they continued to live in soldiers' barracks, where they ate, slept, and trained with their classmates. A man could not live at home with his wife and family until he was 30 years old. At the age of 60, Spartan men could retire from the army.

Boys in Sparta often exercised in outdoor areas.

27.10 Women and Slaves in Sparta

Spartan women lived the same simple life as Spartan men. They wore plain clothing with little decoration. They did not wear jewelry or use cosmetics or perfume. Like Spartan men, women were expected to be strong and healthy—and ready to fight when needed. A wife was expected to look after her husband's property in times of war. She also had to guard it against invaders and revolts by slaves.

Spartan women had many rights that other Greek women did not have. They were free to speak with their husbands' friends. Women could own and control their own property. They could even marry again, should their first husband be away at war for too long a time.

Spartan slaves, the helots, were people the Spartans had conquered. There were many more helots than citizens in Sparta. The Spartans treated the helots harshly, fearful that the helots would revolt.

Sometimes, the Spartan government declared war on the helots so that any slaves it thought might rebel could be legally killed. In fact, the Spartan government once asked the helots to choose their best fighters. The Spartans said that these slaves would be set free as thanks for fighting for Sparta. The helots chose two thousand men. Immediately, the Spartans killed every one of them to **eliminate** the possibility of any future helot leaders.

Despite this harsh treatment, helots did have some rights. They could marry whomever and whenever they wanted. They could pass their names on to their children. They could sell any leftover crops after giving their owner his share. Helots who saved enough money could even buy their freedom.

Like Spartan men, Spartan women were expected to be strong, healthy, and ready to fight. At left is a statue of a Spartan woman athlete.



Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you learned about Athens and Sparta, two very different city-states in ancient Greece.

Comparing Two City-States Its location near the sea made it easier for Athens to develop relationships with other city-states. Sparta's inland location and its culture made it more isolated than Athens. The people of Athens valued art, culture, and education. The people of Sparta valued strength, simplicity, and military skills.

Government Athens was a democracy, though only free men could take part in government. Sparta was primarily a military state. Its government was an oligarchy in which a few men held most of the power.

Economy The economy of Athens relied on trade with other city-states and several foreign lands. The Spartan economy relied on farming and conquest. Sparta depended on slaves and other noncitizens to provide for many of its needs.

Education In Athens, boys were educated to be good citizens. Education balanced book learning and physical training. Girls learned skills for managing the household. In Sparta, boys and girls alike were educated to protect the city-state. Spartan boys began their military training at age 7, and men served in the army until age 60.

Women and Slaves In Athens, women and slaves had far fewer rights than men had. Spartan women had more rights than other Greek women, such as owning property.



This bronze statue is of a Spartan soldier.