9.2 Greek Political Systems
To what extent were ancient Greek political systems democratic?

Explore

Life in Ancient Sparta
What was daily life like in ancient Sparta?

The rich farmland of the Peloponnesus was attractive to many other city-states and civilizations. The fears of outside invasion and of a helot revolt led Sparta to create a dominant military culture that affected all aspects of Spartan life.

Spartan Culture

Because Sparta based its power on military strength, Spartans spent little time focusing on arts and culture. From birth, Spartan citizens were raised to become soldiers. When a boy was born, he was brought before a council of elders who examined him to ensure he was healthy. If the boy was determined to be healthy, he was returned to his parents. If the council decided the child was not healthy in some way, the baby was taken away from his parents and left to die of exposure. Spartans believed this practice would strengthen their society by ensuring that only the strongest members survived.

Photo of monument built to honor Leonidas, with other statues nearby.

Education

When boys reached the age of 7, they left their families and moved into the barracks—military housing—to begin their training as soldiers. They remained in training until age 20, at which time they became members of the Spartan army. They were allowed to marry after they turned 18, but they were not allowed to live with their wives until they turned 30.
Although their training was not as intense as that of their male counterparts, Spartan women were also trained in military techniques, to be able to defend Sparta should enemies attack while the men were away. Additionally, women performed many exercises to become and stay strong, because Spartans believed strong women produced strong children.

This image shows ruins of the historic Spartan city. Sparta was ruled by a military oligarchy and was one of the strongest military powers in ancient Greece.

Societal Roles

While Spartan men maintained power in government affairs, women played an important role in Spartan society. Because the men spent much of their time training for and fighting in wars, Spartan women were expected to run the household and handle the daily business when the men were unable to.

The helots, Sparta’s enslaved class, also played an integral role in society. While the men and women were training for war, the helots carried out the daily work of the city-state. They made the goods, farmed the land, and conducted the limited trade that Sparta had with other city-states.