

8 Reasons It Wasn't Easy Being Spartan

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Infanticide was a disturbingly common act in the ancient world, but in Sparta this practice was organized and managed by the state. All Spartan infants were brought before a council of inspectors and examined for physical defects, and those who weren't up to standards were left to die. The ancient historian Plutarch claimed these "ill-born" Spartan babies were tossed into a chasm at the foot of Mount Taygetus, but most historians now dismiss this as a myth. If a Spartan baby was judged to be unfit for its future duty as a soldier, it was most likely abandoned on a nearby hillside. Left alone, the child would either die of exposure or be rescued and adopted by strangers.

Babies who passed inspection still didn't have it easy. To test their constitutions, Spartan infants were often bathed in wine instead of water. They were also frequently ignored when they cried and commanded never to fear darkness or solitude. According to Plutarch, these "tough love" parenting techniques were so admired by foreigners that Spartan women were widely sought after for their skill as nurses and nannies.

2. Spartan children were placed in a military-style education program.

At the age of 7, Spartan boys were removed from their parents' homes and began the "agoge," a state-sponsored training regimen designed to mold them into skilled warriors and moral citizens. Separated from their families and housed in communal barracks, the young soldiers-in-waiting were instructed in scholastics, warfare, stealth, hunting and athletics. At age 12, initiates were deprived of all clothing save for a red cloak and forced to sleep outside and make their own beds from reeds. To ready them for a life in the field, the boy soldiers were also encouraged to scavenge and even steal their food, though if detected they were punished with floggings.

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Just as all Spartan men were expected to be fighters, all women were expected to bear children. Spartan girls were allowed to remain with their parents, but they were also subjected to a rigorous education and training program. While boys were readied for a life on campaign, girls practiced dance, gymnastics and javelin and discus throwing, which were thought to make them physically strong for motherhood.

3. Hazing and fighting were encouraged among Spartan children.

Much of the Spartan agoge involved typical school subjects like reading, writing, rhetoric and poetry, but the training regimen also had a vicious side. To toughen the young warriors and encourage their development as soldiers, instructors and older men would often instigate fights and arguments between trainees. The agoge was partially designed to help make the youths resistant to hardships like cold, hunger and pain, and boys who showed signs of cowardice or timidity were subject to teasing and violence by peers and superiors alike.

Even Spartan girls were known to participate in this ritualized hazing. During certain religious and state ceremonies, girls would stand before Spartan dignitaries and sing choral songs about the young men of the agoge, often singling out specific trainees for ridicule in order to shame them into stepping up their performance.

4. All Spartan men were expected to be lifelong soldiers.

As grueling as Sparta's martial education system could be, the soldier's life was the only option for young men who wished to become equal citizens, or "Homoioi." According to the edicts of the Spartan lawmaker and reformer Lycurgus, male citizens were legally prevented from choosing any occupation other than the military. This commitment could last for decades, as warriors were required to remain on reserve duty until the age of 60.

Because of their preoccupation with the study of warfare, Sparta's manufacturing and agriculture were left entirely to the lower classes. Skilled laborers, traders and craftsmen were part of the "Perioeci," a class of free non-citizens who lived in the surrounding region of Laconia. Meanwhile, agriculture and food production fell to the enslaved Helots, a servile class that made up the majority of Sparta's population. Ironically, constant fear of Helot revolts and uprisings was a major reason why the Spartan elite became so devoted to building a strong military in the first place.

5. Spartan youths were ritualistically beaten and flogged.

One of Sparta's most brutal practices involved a so-called "contest of endurance" in which adolescents were flogged—sometimes to the death—in front of an altar at the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia. Known as the "diamastigosis," this annual practice was originally used as both a religious ritual and a test of the boys' bravery and resistance to pain. It later devolved into an outright blood sport after Sparta went into decline and fell under control of the Roman Empire. By the third century A.D. there was even an amphitheater constructed so that scores of tourists could cheer on the grisly ordeal.

6. Food was intentionally kept scarce, and poor fitness was cause for ridicule.

When a Spartan man completed the main phase of the agoge at around age 21, he was elected to a "syssitia"—a military-style mess where citizens gathered for public meals. To prepare soldiers for the strain of war and discourage poor fitness, the rations doled out at these communal dining halls were always bland and slightly insufficient. Spartans were renowned for their devotion to physical fitness and proper diet, and they reserved a special loathing for overweight citizens, who were publicly ridiculed and risked being banished from the city-state.

Wine was a staple of the Spartan diet, but they rarely drank to excess and often cautioned their children against drunkenness. In some cases, they would even force Helot slaves to get wildly inebriated as a way of showing young Spartans the negative effects of alcohol.

7. Spartan men were not allowed to live with their wives until age 30.

Spartan society didn't discourage romantic love, but marriage and childrearing were both subject to some peculiar cultural and governmental constraints. The state counseled that men should marry at age 30 and women at 20. Since all men were required to live in a military barracks until 30, couples who married earlier were forced to live separately until the husband completed his active duty military service.

The Spartans saw marriage primarily as a means for conceiving new soldiers, and citizens were encouraged to consider the health and fitness of their mate before tying the knot. In fact, husbands who were unable to have children were expected to seek out virile substitutes to impregnate their wives. Likewise, bachelors were seen as neglecting their duty and were often publically mocked and humiliated at religious festivals.

8. Surrender in battle was the ultimate disgrace.

Spartan soldiers were expected to fight without fear and to the last man. Surrender was viewed as the epitome of cowardice, and warriors who voluntarily laid down their arms were so shamed that they often resorted to suicide. According to the ancient historian Herodotus, two Spartan soldiers who missed out on the famous Battle of Thermopylae returned to their homeland disgraced. One later hanged himself, and the other was only redeemed after he died fighting in a later engagement.

Even Spartan mothers were known for their do-or-die approach to military campaigns. Spartan women are said to have sent their sons off to war with a chilling reminder: "Return with your shield or on it." If a Spartan trooper died in battle, he was viewed as having completed his duty as a citizen. In fact, the law mandated that only two classes of people could have their names inscribed on their tombstones: women who died in childbirth and men who fell in combat.

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