

Spartan military training and organization history essay



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To people today, Sparta would seem like a small, insignificant city-state. It was extremely small in comparison to most of the countries one sees in the twenty-first century. However, Sparta still maintains a respect, and holds a place of honor and glory in our modern world. Spartans are highly ingrained into modern popular culture. Movies like 300 glorify the Spartans, and have helped build a mystique around these ancient warriors. Many sports teams take the Spartan as their mascots, because Spartans have come to symbolize strength, bravery, and courage. Why is this? In ancient Greece, Spartans, or the Lacedaemonians, as they referred to themselves, were considered to be the greatest army in the land. This reputation was created through a variety of ways. Spartans were known for their rigorous military training, the *agoge*, for which nearly every healthy male child was selected. Many Greeks were privy to stories of Spartan glory in battle, and Spartan courage and honor. Most importantly, the other Greek poleis were aware of Spartan military prowess from firsthand experience in fighting alongside the Spartans in the Persian Wars, and later fighting against them in conflicts like the Peloponnesian War. Sparta's reputation was built upon the brutality and intensive training that their young boys and men had to endure. The Spartan treatment of children and teens is not something that would be condoned today, but it was central to the Spartan way of life and most definitely turned their strongest men into fearsome killing machines that inspired fear into any of their unfortunate opponents.

The ancient author, Xenophon, discusses the Spartans in great depth in his work *The Polity of the Lacedaemonians*. Xenophon attributes the Spartans' unique nature to their ancient lawgiver, Lycurgus. Of Lycurgus, Xenophon

explains that “ It was by a stroke of invention rather, and on a pattern much in opposition to the commonly-accepted one, that he brought his fatherland to this pinnacle of prosperity.” The Spartans were unlike any other poleis in ancient Greece. Often, Sparta was at odds with its Greek rivals, the Athenians. These two poleis were markedly diverse both in government and culture. Sparta’s culture was centered on its military, which was the greatest difference between it and the other Greeks poleis. It was Sparta’s military practices and institutions that made it the most unique poleis in all of ancient Greece.

The Spartan military was not only for grown men, as in the modern day. Spartan training began quite early in life. Education of males was geared toward military service from the beginning. From their very birth on through the rest of their days, Spartan males were treated much differently than those of other Greek city-states. Xenophon describes how young men of other poleis were softened by having changes of clothes and wearing shoes. Spartan males were made to walk barefoot, to keep their feet hardened and battle ready, and were only given one set of clothes per year. By training their young boys this early in life, Spartans were able to instill great discipline and obedience. Also, Xenophon explains that unlike other Greek poleis, Sparta’s boys were trained as a group under the tutelage of a Paidonomos. Spartan children were handed over by their father’s to the Paidonomos at an early age. Xenophon describes that the Paidonomos had full control over the child and was encouraged to be very strict. If a Spartan child was disobedient, stern beatings and floggings were seen as sufficient punishment. Spartan men were born to serve in the military. It essentially

was their only calling in life. This is demonstrated more vividly in the next step of Spartan education and training, which was called the *agelai*.

Peter Connolly explains in his book, *Greece and Rome at War*, that the Spartan *agelai* was essentially the basic training and boot camp for the Spartan army. At the age of seven, male children were condensed into small groups known as *agelai*. Once in these groups, the children began their brutal training. The children were not provided with enough food to eat during the day; this urged them to steal food from helots and others around the countryside. Theft was not looked down upon. It was actually encouraged. However, those boys who were caught were punished for simply being caught. Spartans became hearty, strong men through these brutal tests. Greek historian Plutarch speaks to the brutality of the training, and to the boldness, and courageousness of the Spartan boys:

“ The boys make such a serious matter of their stealing, that one of them, as the story goes, who was carrying concealed under his cloak a young fox which he had stolen, suffered the animal to tear out his bowels with its teeth and claws, and died rather than have his theft detected.”

Exercises like these helped the young boys become accustomed to the hardships that they would undoubtedly face during combat and long marches, that is, if they survived. The training conducted in the *agelai* became even harsher and demanding as the boys grew older.

In *The Spartan Army*, Nicholas Sekunda describes that competition between the boys was always present, and was a large part of the training. While in the *agelai*, reading and writing were taught to the boys, along with past
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Spartan glory and war songs celebrating Spartan victories and valor.

Connolly goes on to say that boys were classified as meirakions, or youths, when they reached the age of twelve. The training and punishments were amplified and the boys were given additional duties. As when they were younger, the boys continued to go barefoot and they were allotted only one set of clothes per year. If the boys survived to reach the age of eighteen, they proceeded onto the next step of training.

At eighteen, as Sekunda describes, the surviving young men were referred to as eiren, and these eiren would help train the younger boys just entering the agōgē. Young men who exhibited superior skills would be given the honor of serving in the Krypteia. Furthermore, Sekunda explains that men who reached twenty years of age finally became worthy enough to serve in the army. Men who failed to make the ranks were punished by being placed in a lower social class than the successful warriors. Life for a Spartan man was not easy by any means. Plutarch vividly describes their hardships in his *The Life of Lycurgus*, "... they [the Spartans] were the only men in the world with whom war brought a respite in the training for war." Spartans valued honor and courage above all else. Every soldier wished to die a glorious death on the battlefield. A famous mantra of Spartan women taken from Plutarch's *Moralia* epitomizes Spartan culture and thought. These women were reputed to have said often, "Return with it [soldier's shield] or carried on it!" Sayings like these demonstrate the Spartan character very well. Cowardice was not tolerated, and was the most egregious sin a citizen of Sparta could commit. Men essentially served in the army for their polis until their deaths. Military service was a man's only calling in life.

Sekunda goes on to say that military service was an honor, and required of every man. Most men, married or not, remained with their unit in the barracks into their thirties. And given the short life expectancy of a soldier, and people in general, military service for a Spartan was a lifetime duty. If a man happened to reach the age of sixty, he would be honored, and relieved on his duty. No other Greek poleis conducted such long and harsh training of prospective soldiers or expected more of their soldiers than Sparta. For this reason, Sparta had the most hardened and disciplined troops. The discipline and skill of the Spartans was demonstrated most effectively on the battle field.

Spartans were quite an intimidating force on the battlefield. Most Greeks were aware of their intense training and their skills as soldiers. Spartan soldiers, like those of all Greek poleis, were known as hoplites. These hoplites fought in well organized and disciplined lines. Sekunda explains that the Spartans only had a few distinguishing garments that they wore to differentiate themselves from other Greek hoplites. Spartans wore a crimson tunic with a matching cloak. In addition to their crimson accoutrements, Spartan men typically wore their hair long, which symbolized freedom. One other symbol the Spartans used was the Greek letter lambda (λ) which adorned Spartan shields, a reference to their homeland, which they called Lacedaemon.

In *Hoplites: The Classical Greek Battle Experience*, Victor Hanson describes the heart of the well oiled Spartan war machine. The primary battle formation of the Spartans and their fellow Greeks was the phalanx.

Essentially a phalanx was made up of heavily armored hoplites lining up in <https://assignbuster.com/spartan-military-training-and-organization-history-essay/>

rows. Each hoplite held a shield and protected the man next to him. The soldiers were armed with a spear and a short sword. This formation was heavily armored and dangerous to opposing forces. Hoplites were protected by a wall of shields and a plethora of spearheads. Forces like those of Ancient Persia had never seen something of the sort, which gave the Greeks great advantages over the inexperienced and lightly armed Persian soldiers. Sparta was the most effective Greek force simply because of its intense training and sense of valor and honor. Spartans were not afraid to die, in fact they wished for death, and this, along with their use of the phalanx made them a powerful and intimidating force. Their skill, along with their intimidation factor proved to be quite effective.

Ancient Sparta still evokes imagery of bravery, heroics, and honor. This is demonstrated in the fact that Sparta serves as an icon for many schools and sports teams around the United States. Using the image of Sparta as something to aspire to-as an image of honor and valor-is quite revealing regarding the way the ancient city state is remembered even now. Movies are made that glorify the Spartans and their military exploits. Everyone recognizes the Spartans as symbols of strength. It is amazing that Sparta's reputation has remained honorable and has stood the test of time. In ancient Greece, the Spartans were known as the best and most fierce warriors. Their training was brutal and unforgiving, and lasted for nearly thirteen long years. Young boys were beaten, starved, and treated with extreme brutality. If the boys made it to manhood and survived their training, and were deemed good enough soldiers, they spent their lives serving their polis in the military. Death on the battlefield was the highest honor the Spartan soldier could

achieve. It is not surprising that these fearless, hardened warriors were so intimidating to all those they faced in battle.