

## VALOUR, DUTY, SACRIFICE: SPARTA

'In Sparta are to be found those who are most enslaved  
and those who are the most free.'

CRITIAS OF ATHENS



Spartan infantry in a formation called a phalanx.

# OVERVIEW

## KEY EVENTS

### 800 BCE

Sparta emerges from the Greek Dark Age

### 743–724 BCE

Spartan conquest of Messenia in the First Messenian War

### 706 BCE

Taras in southern Italy founded as a Spartan colony

### 685–668 BCE

Second Messenian War

### 669 BCE

Sparta defeated by Argos at the battle of Hysiai

### c. 650 BCE

Reforms of Spartan society begin

### 550 BCE

Sparta defeats Argos

Peloponnesian League created

### 510 BCE

Sparta becomes a force for expelling tyranny in Greece

Hippias' tyranny ended by Spartan intervention

### 464 BCE

Earthquake in Sparta devastates the city

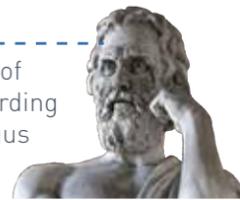
## KEY POINTS

- At the end of the Dark Age, the Spartan *polis* emerged from the union of a few small villages in the Eurotas valley.
- Owing to a shortage of land for its citizens, Sparta waged war on its neighbour Messenia to expand its territory.
- The suppression of the Messenians led to a volatile slave population that threatened Sparta's way of life, making the need for reform urgent.
- A new constitution was put in place to ensure Sparta could protect itself from this new threat, as well as from tyranny.
- Sweeping reforms were made that transformed Sparta into a powerful military state that soon came to dominate the Peloponnese.



### LYCURGUS

Legendary reformer of ancient Sparta. According to the legend, Lycurgus went to receive guidance from the Oracle at Delphi, and then instituted the *Great Rhetra* (Spartan constitution) that turned Sparta into a militaristic society built around the *hoplite* class of citizen. Lycurgus was believed to have remodelled nearly every aspect of Spartan society—politics, social dynamics, the economy and trade—in an effort to create the perfect state.



### ORACLE AT DELPHI

A prophet of the ancient world. The oracle was a priestess known as the *Pythia*, who was based in Delphi, on Mt Parnassus. The oracle provided divine messages from Apollo to travellers seeking guidance.



### TYRTAEUS

A Greek lyric poet who lived most of his life in Sparta, and wrote in the mid 600s BCE. He wrote poems promoting Spartan values, especially military discipline and dedication to the state.

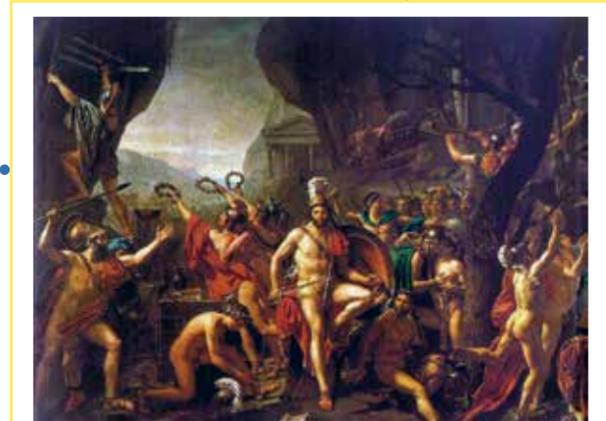
## KEY CONCEPTS

	DEMOCRACY	OLIGARCHY	TYRANNY	MONARCHY
DEFINITION	Power vested in the hands of all citizens of the <i>polis</i>	Power vested in the hands of a few individuals	A system under the control of a non-hereditary ruler unrestricted by any laws or constitution	A system under the control of a king
CHARACTERISTICS	Citizens of the <i>polis</i> all share equal rights in the political sphere Economic or social disadvantage is limited as a factor in disqualifying political rights All citizens are equal before the law (people can't escape prosecution or punishment based on birth) Most magistrates are selected by lot	A small, powerful and wealthy aristocratic class Most citizens barred from inclusion in government	One individual exercises complete authority over all aspects of everyday life without constraint While sometimes perceived as exhibiting violent behaviour, tyrants in ancient Greece were not always cruel. They also marked an important departure from hereditary kingship	Hereditary rule passing from father to son Family dynasties claim power through association with a key mythological figure
FAMOUS INDIVIDUALS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cleisthenes of Athens</li> <li>• Pericles of Athens</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'Oligarchy of 400' of Athens</li> <li>• Leontiades of Thebes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dionysius I of Syracuse</li> <li>• Peisistratus of Athens</li> <li>• Pheidon of Argos</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Philip II of Macedonia</li> <li>• Alexander of Macedonia</li> <li>• Leonidas of Sparta</li> </ul>



### KING LEONIDAS I

Arguably the most famous King of Sparta. Leonidas commanded Spartan forces at the Battle of Thermopylae in 480 BCE, leading a mission to delay the Persian assault. He came to symbolise Spartan ideals of valour, duty and sacrifice.



↑ *Leonidas at Thermopylae* by Jacques Louis David, 1814.

## INTRODUCTION

**EXILED SPARTAN KING DEMARATUS TO XERXES I OF PERSIA:** ‘So is it with the Lacedaemonians, fighting singly they are as brave as any man living, and together they are the best warriors on earth. They are free, yet not wholly free: the law is their master, whom they fear much more than your men fear you. They do whatever it bids; and its bidding is always the same, that they must never flee from the battle before any multitude of men, but must abide at their post and there conquer or die.’<sup>1</sup>

### SOURCE 2.01

LOCATION OF SPARTA



According to the ancient myths, Sparta was founded in pre-history by Lacedaemon, the son of Zeus and Taygete. Lacedaemon named the region *Lacedaemonia* after himself—although we know it as Laconia, and its people as Laconians. Historically, the *polis* of Sparta was founded in 950 BCE during the Greek Dark Age, after the migration of the Dorians into southern Greece.

The Sparta that emerged in 800 BCE would have been very different from the military camp the city became in the sixth and fifth centuries. Surrounded by mountains, the Spartan *polis* was formed from five villages in the Eurotas Valley in central Laconia. Sparta’s population was restricted by its limited farmland—it never had more than 9000 full citizens in the eighth and seventh centuries BCE, and was down to barely 1000 citizens by the fourth century BCE.

The Eurotas Valley supplied the Spartans with all the farmland they needed to develop and thrive. Open farmland produced wheat, barley, olives and grapes—however, the foundation of Spartan society rested on the backs of its slave population. At every point in its history, Sparta possessed a population of slaves (or *helots*) that outnumbered the Spartans. As the Spartan population shrank in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, this ratio would increase.



HISTORIAN  
HODKINSON ON  
FINDING EVIDENCE

### SOURCE 2.02

Ruins of Ancient Sparta.

## FIRST MESSENIAN WAR (734–724 BCE)

**TYRTAEUS:** ‘To conquer her they fought full nineteen years steadfastly ever, with endurance in their hearts, those spearman of our fathers’ fathers’ time, and in the twentieth the foe took flight, and left their fertile farms among Ithome’s heights.’

By the mid-eighth century Sparta required more land to satisfy the needs of its growing population. With the exception of Taras in southern Italy, settled in 706 BCE, Sparta did not seek overseas colonial expansion for its population. Rather, it turned its attention westward over Mt Taygetus, to Messenia and its thriving open countryside.

In 743 BCE the Spartans waged war against the Messenian people. The conflict dragged on until the Messenian fortress at Ithome was captured by the Spartan army nearly two decades later. The Messenians were reduced to *helots* under Spartan dominion. They lost all their rights, as well as their freedom of movement, and were forced to pledge half their annual harvest to the Spartan state. Sparta had won what it needed most—farmland for its people.

## SECOND MESSENIAN WAR (685–668 BCE)

**HELENA SCHRADER:** ‘Arguably, nothing was more important to the evolution of Sparta into a city-state with a highly unusual and unique constitution than the Spartan conquest of Messenia.’

The peace between Sparta and its *helot* population did not last. Forty years later, in 685 BCE, the *helots* of Sparta rose up in rebellion, aided by the people of Argos in the north-eastern Peloponnese, who were long-time enemies of the Spartans. In an attempt to overthrow their masters, the *helot* population invaded Laconia and managed to hold back the Spartans for over thirteen years. But in 668 BCE the Messenians were once again defeated and forced into servitude. Apart from some coastal communities and a few interior regions, all of Messenia was under Spartan dominion for the next three hundred years.



### SOURCE 2.03

An artist’s impression of Aristomenes of Messenia fighting Spartan warriors in the Second Messenian War.

## THE GREAT RHETRA AND SPARTAN GOVERNMENT

TYRTAEUS: 'Having listened to Phoebus they brought home from Delphi, prophecies of the god and words that will come true'<sup>2</sup>

Around 650 BCE a fundamental reorganisation of Spartan life took place in the form of the *Great Rhetra*. The *rhetra*, meaning 'oracle' or 'proclamation' was the first and greatest in a series of laws designed to 'create order by means of reform' and transform Sparta into a new kind of political community.<sup>3</sup> This new *constitution* completely reorganised the state to become something completely new in the ancient world.<sup>4</sup> It combined all the elements of governance existing in Greece at the time and sought to produce the perfect political system free from tyranny. The *rhetra* sought to create *eunomia*, a state governed under 'good laws and government' by limiting the power of the kings, empowering the common citizen, and establishing a powerful council of city elders. However, the cost of the *rhetra* was the complete personal freedom of all of Sparta's citizens. After the laws came into effect, every citizen was bound by them from the cradle to the grave.

Diodorus, an historian from the Greek colonies in Sicily, provides a detailed portion of this oracle given to the people of Sparta.



THE SPARTAN CONSTITUTION

### SOURCE 2.04

Diodorus Siculus, *The Library of History* 7.12.6 trans. C. H. Oldfather (Cambridge: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1989).

#### DIODORUS ON THE GREAT RHETRA

Council is to begin with the divinely honoured kings, who have the lovely city of Sparta in their care, and with the Ancient Elders. Then the men of the people, responding in turn to straight rhetra must say what is noble and do all that is just.

Diodorus' extract reveals three main separate elements to this new political system: the kings, the city elders and the citizens of Sparta itself.

### ACTIVITY

#### CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

1. Outline the reasons why the Messenian wars were fought.
2. Explain how the campaigns both profited and endangered the Spartan people.
3. Analyse what the Spartans realised about their own society after the Messenian campaigns.

### HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

#### RESULTS OF THE MESSENIAN WARS AND THE NEED FOR REFORM

The Spartans learned many harsh lessons from their wars with Messenia. Their need for more land required the annexation of territory that could only be achieved with a powerful army. However, once the campaign was over, the Spartans realised that the hostile *helot* population could only be countered by a professional standing army. This was a new concept for the ancient Greeks, who mobilised troops infrequently and then demobilised them after battles were won.

One theory on the causes of the changes in Sparta is that acquiring new territory from Messenia revealed deep imbalances within Sparta. New farmland was provided only to veterans of the Messenian conflict, which led to inequalities among the Spartan population.<sup>5</sup> This inequality led to the rise of a wealthy class of merchants in the city who wielded disproportionate political influence over their countrymen.

According to this theory, a drastic revolution was needed to save and protect the city. With this in mind, the Spartan *polis* began to implement reforms, in the process transforming Spartan society into something unique in the ancient world.

## THE LEGEND OF LYCURGUS

THE ORACLE AT DELPHI: 'Beloved of the Gods, and rather God than man.'<sup>6</sup>

Modern historians generally believe that reforms that transformed Spartan society into a military state were introduced over a number of centuries. However, the ancient Greeks attributed the changes to the legendary figure of Lycurgus. Many stories were associated with Lycurgus in antiquity. Plutarch noted that:

'nothing can be said [about him] which is not disputed, since indeed there are different accounts of his birth, his travels, his death, and, above all, of his work as lawmaker and statesman; and there is least agreement among historians as to the times in which the man lived.'<sup>7</sup>

According to legend, Lycurgus travelled across Greece as far as Crete and Ionia to observe the finest political systems of his day, selecting elements he liked in a bid to create the perfect constitution for Sparta. He determined that a complete revolution was required. Lycurgus travelled to the Oracle at Delphi. After consulting the oracle, he received the 'Great Rhetra'—a proclamation to make Sparta's constitution the greatest in the world.

Lycurgus was said to have then returned to Sparta and remodelled nearly every aspect of Spartan society. Politics, social dynamics, the economy and trade were all restructured to create the perfect state composed of perfect citizens. He sought *eunomia* for Sparta: the application of good laws and the establishment of justice as a virtue of everyday life.

Lycurgus made the Spartans swear an oath that they would not alter his laws until he returned from consulting the Oracle at Delphi. After the oracle confirmed the excellence of his reforms, Lycurgus resolved not to return to Sparta and, in an effort to best serve the state, took his own life to ensure that his laws would remain unchanged forever.

#### BELIEFS AND VALUES

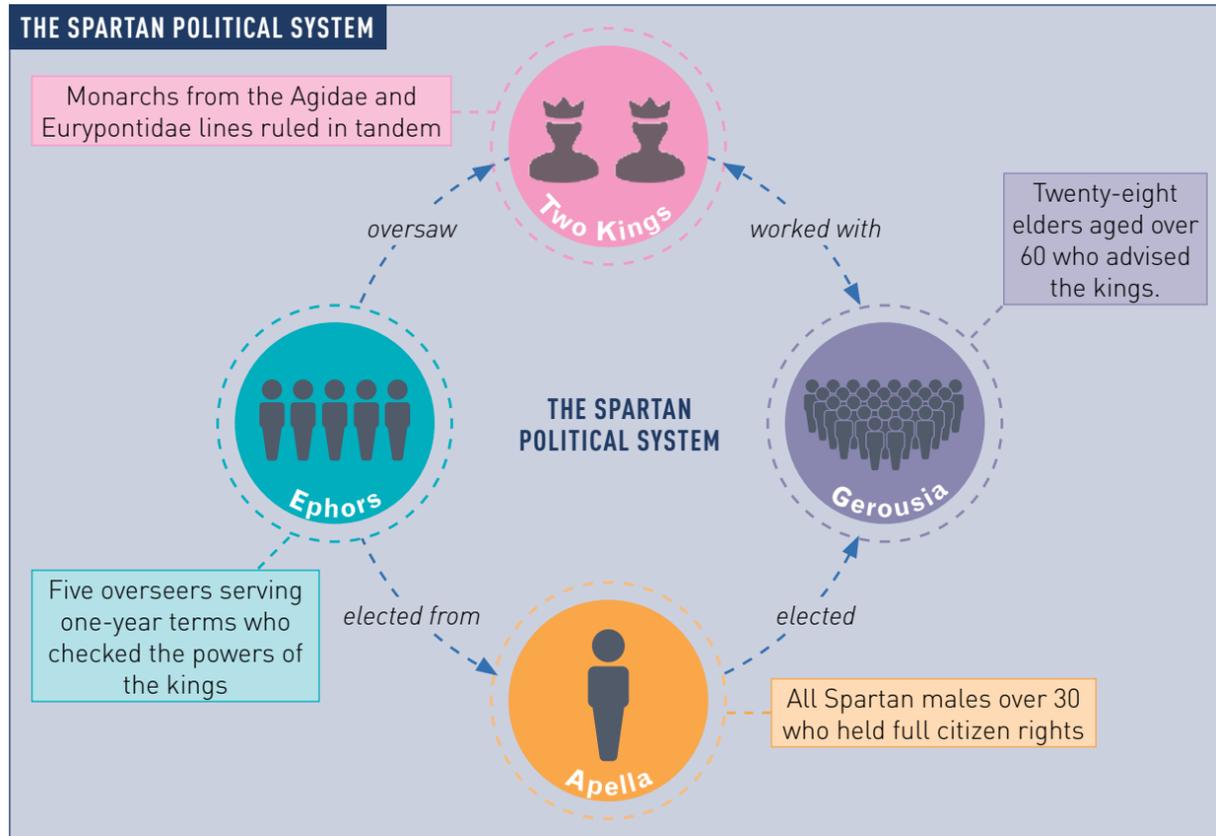
1. Explain what Lycurgus supposedly hoped to achieve with his reforms.
2. Why might the ancient Spartans have attributed all of their reforms to this legendary figure?
3. How might the legend have made Spartans more likely to support the laws?

### SOURCE 2.05

The changes that transformed Sparta into an unparalleled military state were attributed by the ancient Greeks to the legendary figure of Lycurgus.



## THE SPARTAN POLITICAL SYSTEM



## HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

## THE NEW SPARTAN GOVERNMENT

The new Spartan government adopted a 'suitable alternative model' to that of the other city-states in Greece. Instead of choosing between a monarchy, an oligarchy or a democracy, Sparta adopted parts of all of them. The laws kept both Spartan kings as the heads of state, but introduced a council of elders, known as the *gerousia*, to guide and advise them. In addition, an assembly comprised of all Spartan citizens established a democratic element in the Spartan constitution. All these measures formed a new social contract between the kings, the aristocracy and the citizenry, designed to stave off both anarchy and tyranny, as no one political faction could function without the support of the others.

## THE KINGS

**XENOPHON:** 'He ordained that the King shall offer all the public sacrifices on behalf of the state, in virtue of his divine descent, and that, whatever may be the destination to which the state sends out an army, he shall be its leader.'<sup>8</sup>

The Spartan system of governance was the opposite of political tradition elsewhere in Greece.<sup>9</sup> While other city-states overthrew monarchic rule, the Spartans embraced it, retaining their unique system of dual-kingship, called a *dyarchy*. The *dyarchs* (dual-rulers) were both the sons of rival families. In practical terms, the presence of the *Agidae* and *Eurypontidae* line of kings was a safeguard against oppressive monarchism, as one ruler's power would always be checked by the other.



SPARTAN KINGS:  
RESEARCH



The changes instituted under Spartan law limited the power of the kings domestically but gave them many new roles to fulfil.

The kings lost much of their law-making power. They now shared this authority with a council of city elders, the Spartan assembly of citizens and the *ephorate* (see page 48). Their judicial power was also limited but they were the ultimate authority over civil issues regarding the adoption of children, marriage of an heiress without a father, and all matters concerning Sparta's public roads.

The kings were also the supreme commanders-in-chief of the Spartan army. They alone had the right to wage war on any other state, although they did require the approval of the Spartan people. The kings were expected to lead the Spartan army into combat and fight on the frontlines. Despite the limitations on their power during peacetime, the kings were the highest authority over life and death during a military campaign. After 507 BCE only one king at a time was allowed to lead the army, so if he fell Sparta would still have one adult male sovereign.

## SOURCE 2.06

A modern statue of Leonidas, the legendary ancient Spartan warrior king.

## DID YOU KNOW?

A Spartan king was succeeded by the first son born after his coronation. If a son was born to the man before he became king, that child was passed over in favour of the child born during his reign.

## CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

1. In what ways was the power of the Spartan kings limited?
2. What power were the kings still left with after the reforms?
3. What were the key roles and responsibilities of the Spartan kings?

## EXTENSION

1. Why do you believe Sparta retained their monarchs when most other Greek states overthrew them?
2. What do you think separated the new Spartan kings from monarchs elsewhere in the ancient world?
3. Evaluate, using evidence, the advantages and disadvantages of dual-kingship.

## THE GEROUSIA

**PLUTARCH:** 'Only in Sparta does it pay to grow old.'<sup>10</sup>

According to the Great Rhetra, the supreme powers of the Spartan kings were checked by a council of seniors known as the *gerousia*. Stemming from the ancient Greek word for 'elder', this council of 30 was composed of 28 male citizens over sixty years of age and the two Spartan kings. Its role was to advise the kings on matters of national urgency and prepare business to be presented to the citizenry when they assembled in congress. It also acted as the supreme criminal judges of the city, trying cases of murder and treason. No potential law could be brought before the people without the approval of the *gerousia*—which shows the enormous power it had.

GEROUSIA  
ELECTIONS:  
MORE INFO

Theoretically, any Spartan male could hold a position on this council, but it was more likely that these posts were held by only the most prominent Spartan families; the office of *gerousia* was for life. The vote of the *gerousia* was equal to that of the kings in matters of the highest importance, such as issues of war and rebellion. It also possessed the power to veto the decisions of the citizen assembly if it believed that the decisions were a threat to the laws of Sparta.

**➔ SOURCE 2.07**

Plutarch, *Lycurgus* 5.6, trans. Bernadotte Perrin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1914).

PLUTARCH ON THE *GEROUSIA*

Among the many innovations which Lycurgus made, the first and most important was his institution of a senate, or Council of Elders, which, as Plato says, by being blended with the 'feverish' government of the kings, and by having an equal vote with them in matters of the highest importance, brought safety and due moderation into counsels of state. For before this the civil polity was veering and unsteady, inclining at one time to follow the kings towards tyranny, and at another to follow the multitude towards democracy; but now, by making the power of the senate a sort of ballast for the ship of state and putting her on a steady keel, it achieved the safest and the most orderly arrangement, since the twenty-eight senators always took the side of the kings when it was a question of curbing democracy, and, on the other hand, always strengthened the people to withstand the encroachments of tyranny.

**➔ SOURCE 2.08**

Aristotle, *Politics* 2.1271a, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1944).

ARISTOTLE ON THE *GEROUSIA*

Again, the procedure in the election of the Elders as a mode of selection is not only childish, but it is wrong that one who is to be the holder of this honourable office should canvass for it, for the man worthy of the office ought to hold it whether he wants to or not. But as it is the lawgiver clearly does the same here as in the rest of the constitution: he makes the citizens ambitious and has used this for the election of the Elders, for nobody would ask for office if he were not ambitious; yet surely ambition and love of money are the motives that bring about almost the greatest part of the voluntary wrongdoing that takes place among mankind.

## ACTIVITY

## HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

Using Sources 2.07 and 2.08 and your own knowledge, respond to the following:

1. Outline the reasons why Plutarch praises Lycurgus' *gerousia*.
2. Explain why Aristotle condemned the *gerousia*.
3. Evaluate the view that the *gerousia* acted as a force against tyranny in Sparta. Use evidence to support your response.

## THE EPHORS

PLATO: 'As a remedy he introduced the authority of the Elders and of the Ephors to serve as a bond of safety for the kingly power; and because of this they have been kept safe and glorious all these generations since law became supreme.'<sup>11</sup>

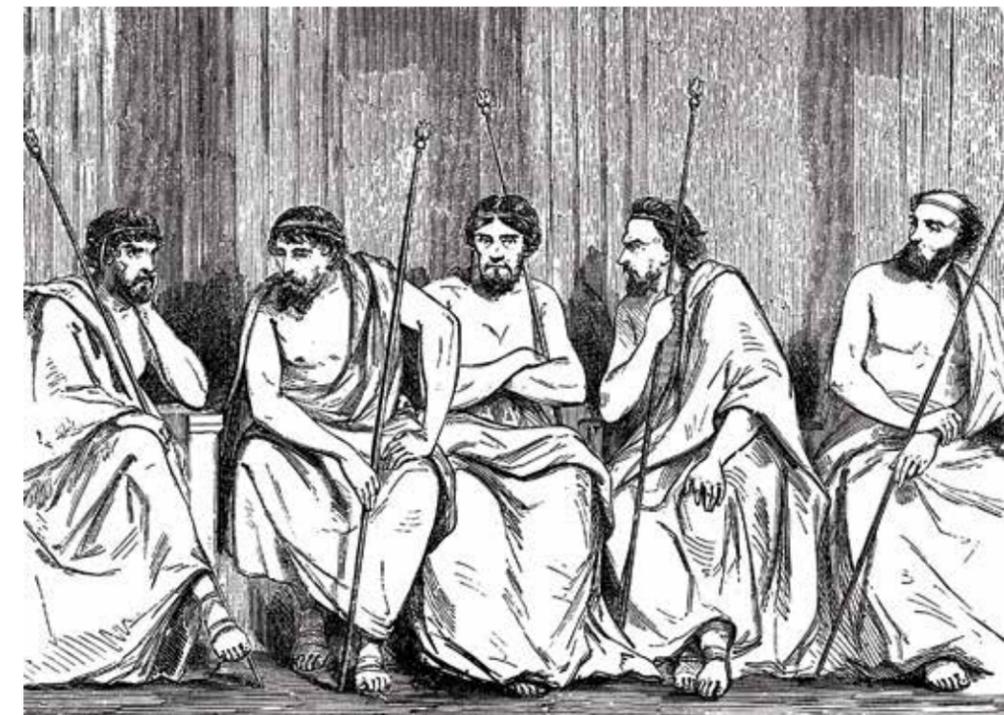
While the Great Rhetra brought reform to the Spartan state, further change occurred in the mid-seventh century BCE when King Theopompus introduced five magistrates called *ephors* (literally 'those who oversee') to the Spartan political system.<sup>12</sup> The *ephorate* became the physical embodiment of the people's power

over their own government and the ultimate check on the power of the Spartan kings. These five Spartan *ephors*, each representing one of Sparta's original five villages, were the definitive overseers of all civil proceedings, deferring only to the *gerousia* on specific matters of legislative importance. The *ephors* were elected annually. They were chosen from the entire body of citizens—meaning that every male Spartan citizen had a chance to directly participate in the administration of their city.

The roles of the *ephors* were quite diverse. They were expected to:

- oversee the affairs of state
- call the meetings of the *apella* (the Spartan assembly)
- supervise the rulings of the kings and check their power if they exceeded their authority
- arrest the kings if they committed a crime against the Spartan constitution
- act as judges over civil legal cases as the supreme public court of Sparta
- direct and administer the *agoge*, Sparta's youth education and training program
- annually declare war on the *helot* population
- ensure the maintenance of strict order and discipline of the Spartan state
- join a king during a military campaign to ensure they did not abuse their power while abroad.

The *ephors* protected the people from the oppression of the monarchs. Every month the kings swore an oath that they would observe the laws of the state, and the *ephors* would swear that the kings could retain their power over the people without restriction—as long as they held true to their word. If a Spartan king was seen to be breaking this oath, a 'grand jury' of *ephors* and the *gerousia* would meet to determine if the king should still be permitted to rule.

**➔ SOURCE 2.09**

The five *ephors*.

## SOURCE 2.10

Xenophon, Constitution of the Lacedaemonians 15.6, trans. E. C. Marchant, G. W. Bowersock (Cambridge: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1925).

## XENOPHON, THE OATH OF THE KINGS AND EPHORS

All rise from their seats when the King appears; only the Ephors do not rise from their official chairs. And they exchange oaths monthly, the Ephors on behalf of the state, the King for himself. And this is the King's oath: 'I will reign according to the established laws of the state.' And this is the oath of the state: 'While you abide by your oath, we will keep the kingship unshaken.'

## SOURCE 2.11

Aristotle, Politics 2.1270b, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1944).

## ARISTOTLE ON THE EPHORS

Moreover the regulations for the Ephorate are also bad. For this office has absolute control over their most important affairs, but the Ephors are appointed from the entire people, so that quite poor men often happen to get into the office, who owing to their poverty are to be easily bought ... for certain Ephors were corrupted with money and so far as lay in their power ruined the whole state. And because the office was too powerful, and equal to a tyranny, the kings also were compelled to cultivate popular favour, so that in this way too the constitution was jointly injured ... Also the mode of life of the Ephors is not in conformity with the aim of the state, for it is itself too luxurious, whereas in the case of the other citizens the prescribed life goes too far in the direction of harshness, so that they are unable to endure it, and secretly desert the law and enjoy the pleasures of the body.

## SOURCE 2.12

Paul Cartledge, Spartan Reflections (California: University of California Press, 2001), 36.

## HISTORIAN CARTLEDGE ON THE REPRESENTATION OF THE EPHORATE

The Ephors, on the other hand, though elected from all the damos (voting population), were certainly in no sense popular representatives. Rather, on attaining a position of collective eminence, the Ephorate fitted smoothly into the oligarchic hierarchy, satisfying the need for relatively youthful and dynamic executive, while its individual members were prevented by their annual tenure of office from attaining a dangerously large amount of personal power.

## ACTIVITY

## SOURCES AS EVIDENCE

Using Sources 2.10–2.12 and your own knowledge, respond to the following:

1. Outline the main responsibilities of the *ephors* according to Xenophon.
2. Explain why Aristotle and Cartledge disapprove of the *ephorate*.
3. Evaluate the impact of the *ephorate* on Spartan government. Use evidence to support your response.

## THE APELLA: THE SPARTAN ASSEMBLY

TYRTAEUS: 'After [the kings and elders] ... the commoners shall make response to direct proposals with conscientious speech and all just consequence, making no twisted plans against our realm; and commoner's majority shall win the day.'

The *apella* was the general assembly of all Spartan males over the age of thirty who had full citizenship rights. This body was officially summoned by the *ephors* every month to vote on matters of importance, such as issues of peace and war, the election of *ephors*, membership of the *gerousia* and even succession of the king. Sparta's reformed political system was 'based on strong elements of institutional civic equality'<sup>13</sup> as no full Spartan citizen was excluded from the *apella*. The Great Rhetra dictated that 'to the people shall belong the power' and this was very apparent in Sparta, as the law instilled in every man a fundamental decision-making role within the assembly.<sup>14</sup>

Thus social stability rested on the consensus of the people, as the vote of the assembly could not be countered or amended by the kings or the *gerousia* once it had passed.<sup>15</sup>

However, despite its power, the *apella* was still a passive body. It could not initiate debate or legislation, only deal with matters presented to it by the *gerousia*, and even then it could not alter or amend the law, only agree or disagree with a course of action. Plutarch stated that if the assembly was seen to be perverting the laws it could be restricted by the *gerousia* and the meeting would be dissolved, 'but if the people should adopt a distorted motion, the senators and kings shall have power of adjournment.'<sup>16</sup> Regardless of the potential for corruption from the elders or kings, there was still a significant check in place against tyranny—as no major change in law could be passed without the approval of the *apella*.

## THE SPARTAN POLITICAL AND JUDICIAL ASSEMBLIES

It is extremely doubtful whether there was ever much debate in the Spartan Assembly ... voting was conducted according to an archaic procedure, by 'shouting and not by ballot'. In other words, the Spartans did not recognise the principle of 'one man one vote', according to which everyone counts for one and no one for more than one. Moreover, as already noted, the methods of electing Ephors and Gerontes [Gerosia] were dismissed by Aristotle as 'childish', presumably because they were so easily manipulated. ... It cannot be stressed too much that there was no popular judiciary in Sparta.

## SOURCE 2.13

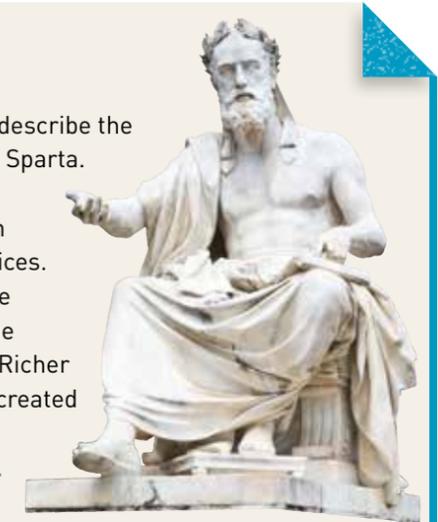
Paul Cartledge, Spartan Reflections (California: University of California Press, 2001), 51–52.

## THE SPARTAN 'MIRAGE'

In the 1930s François Ollier coined the term the 'Spartan mirage'<sup>17</sup> to describe the way writers during the late Classical and Hellenistic periods idealised Sparta. Ollier argued that individuals such as Xenophon, Plato and Plutarch had helped to construct a romantic version of the Spartan state, which then influenced modern scholarship about the city and its many practices. Following Sparta's decline in the fourth century BCE, the more positive traditions and institutions of the *polis* were greatly publicised, while the problems were systematically overlooked. Despite historians such as Richer questioning the accepted version of events, arguing that the ancients created a 'distorted history on the Spartans'<sup>18</sup>, many modern writers continue to present Sparta as a model city-state.

## SOURCE 2.14

The writer Xenophon.



## SPARTA: MONARCHY, DEMOCRACY OR OLIGARCHY?

Sparta was an 'abnormal *polis*'<sup>19</sup> in many ways. A casual observer would witness its kings at the head of an army and declare the state a monarchy, but as these monarchs needed the permission of their people to go to war it would signify the very principle of a democracy. However, the need for the *gerousia* to present the matter to the people in an open assembly still clearly gives the impression of an oligarchy. The reforms of the seventh and sixth centuries BCE revolutionised Spartan society, creating an avenue for democracy and a bastion against tyranny, while still holding true to more archaic concepts of monarchism and aristocratic rule.



POLITICAL REFORMS: ESSAY

Despite possessing some similar traits to other city-states, Sparta's constitution was unique in the ancient world, leading to both the animosity and admiration of the other Greeks.<sup>20</sup>

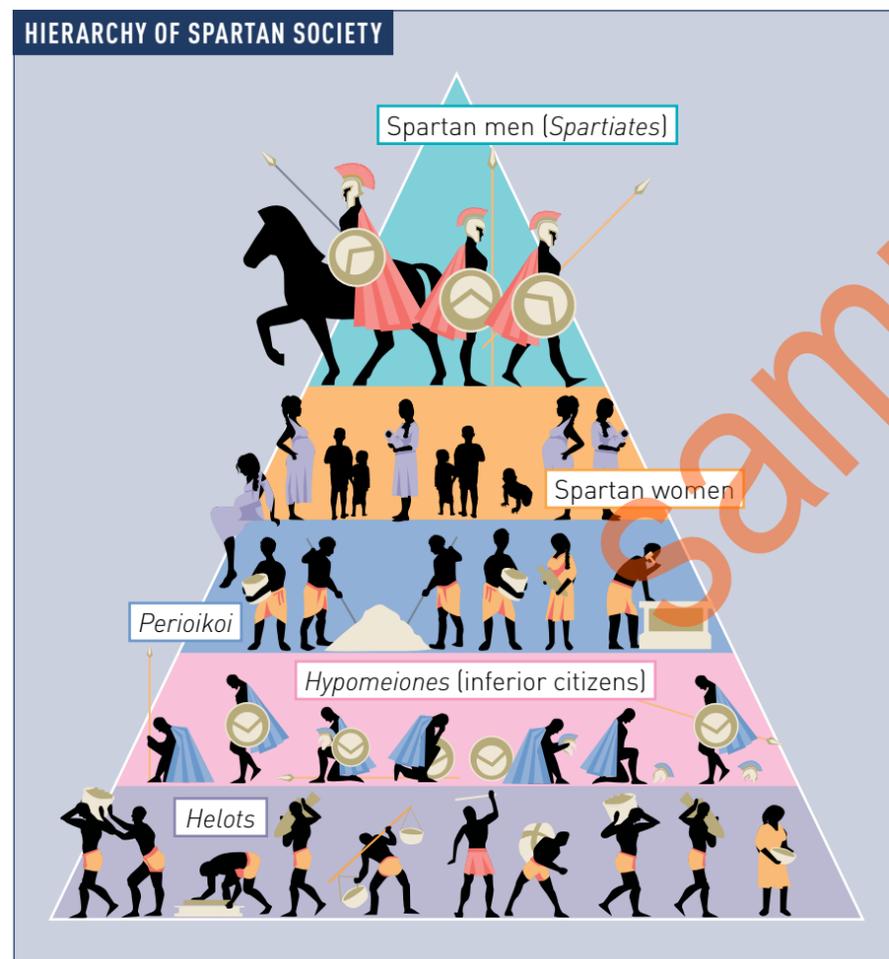
ACTIVITY

HISTORICAL INTERPRETATIONS

Choose one of the following Spartan political groups and complete the tasks below:

- the kings
  - the *gerousia*
  - the *ephors*
  - the *apella*.
1. Collect three quotes under 100 words from a mixture of ancient and modern historians on your chosen group.
  2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of these interpretations? What evidence do they rely on? What information do they omit?
  3. Present a five-minute talk to your class that summarises the main historical interpretations of your chosen political group. End your presentation with a summary of your own views on the matter. Remember to cite evidence throughout.

THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF SPARTA



HYPOMEIONES—  
SPARTAN INFERIORS:  
MORE INFO

In the ninth century BCE, Spartans were largely dedicated to their own family (or *oikos*). Tribal and clan loyalties saw Sparta fragmented into five territorial villages (or *obai*). This led to great disunity, as each citizen sought to surpass their neighbour in power, influence and wealth. However, by the seventh century BCE Spartan society was radically reshaped into three main social classes:

- *Spartiates* (full citizens)
- *perioikoi* (second-class citizens)
- *helots* (slaves).

Significant social reform focused all aspects of Spartan life on the development of a military *polis*. While other Greek states focused on accumulating wealth and trade, Sparta's only trade was war.

SPARTIATES

FRAGMENT OF AN OLD GREEK STORY: 'It seems all of Greece knows what is the right thing to do, but it is only the Spartans that do anything about it.'

*Spartiates* were male citizens over the age of thirty, and they were considered to be the only 'true' Spartans. They were the frontline of Sparta's army—and were considered symbolically to be the walls of the city. They held full political rights under Spartan law, possessing the power (or *kratos*) to sit and vote in the Spartan assembly and to join the *gerousia* after their military service ended at the age of sixty. Interestingly, although *Spartiates* exercised immense political freedom, they were socially and economically restricted. For example, in an effort to protect Sparta from attack—both internal and external—Spartan laws dictated that *Spartiates* were forbidden to engage in agriculture, trade or any other professional work: their sole occupation was to serve in the Spartan army.

According to Plutarch, Lycurgus divided Laconia into 30 000 fields (*kleroi*, or *kleros* in singular) and the area around Sparta into another 9 000 *kleroi*—one for each *Spartiate* at the time.<sup>21</sup> This equal distribution of land was done to avoid the discontent that had followed the earlier annexation of Messenian territory. All agricultural work on the *kleroi* was completed by *helots*. Despite controlling a large degree of property, *Spartiates* did not truly 'own' their own produce—or even their *helots*. They were merely the 'caretakers' of these resources for the state. Trade and commerce were actively discouraged, and farming for profit was forbidden.

Life for a *Spartiate* was organised similar to that of an ant colony or a bee hive.<sup>22</sup> Devoting their lives to civic and military affairs, nobody was allowed to live as they pleased.<sup>23</sup> *Spartiates* even needed the permission of their commanding officers to leave the city. When finished with their daily tasks, *Spartiates* were expected to supervise the young in their training or to learn something from their own elders. Every aspect of life was predetermined for *Spartiates* and everyone knew their place.<sup>24</sup> Life was one of public service, civic morality, patriotism, and devotion to the collective and to the laws of Sparta.<sup>25</sup> The life of a *Spartiate* was simple—they served their city and protected its laws.

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

1. Outline the major requirements for being considered a citizen of Sparta.
2. What were the duties and responsibilities of *Spartiates*?
3. Explain why the *Spartiates* consider themselves as equals.

SPARTIATES:  
EXTENSION

THE NATURE  
OF CITIZENSHIP  
IN SPARTA

DID YOU KNOW?

*Spartiates* were all considered to be equal. This belief became so ingrained that they referred to themselves as *homoioi*, meaning 'those who are alike'.

ACTIVITY

## THE SYSSITION

Every *Spartiate* was considered equal to his fellow citizen and many reforms were put in place to reinforce this sense of equality. The laws stated that all *Spartiates* were to live and eat in a common mess hall (or *syssition*; the plural is *syssitia*). Part dinner hall, part barracks, each *syssition* held about fifteen *Spartiates*.<sup>26</sup> The *syssitia* were central to the daily lives of *Spartiates* as they spent more time in these *syssitia* than with their own families. *Spartiates* between the ages of twenty and thirty were quartered in these barracks, treating their bunk mates as a 'substitute family'.<sup>27</sup> Even at the age of thirty, when a *Spartiate* had access to his own land and a home to sleep in, he usually spent his evenings in the *syssition* rather than with his own wife and children.

*Syssitia* were introduced in Sparta to prevent lethargy and overindulgence. Instead of eating at home served by servants, becoming 'fat like an animal and useless to the state',<sup>28</sup> *Spartiates* were required to join their comrades every night for the evening meal where they would eat plain dishes such as the infamous *melas zomos* or 'black broth'.

Emphasising the equality within the brotherhood, no *Spartiate* was excused from the *syssitia*'s evening meal, not even the kings. Only those sacrificing or hunting were forgiven—and even then a portion of the hunt had to be delivered to the *syssition* in compensation for their absence. Each *Spartiate* was expected to pay a *syssition* fee. If a Spartan could not pay the fee—in a move that Aristotle criticised as a 'perversion of the original purpose of the reforms'<sup>29</sup>—he lost his full rights and privileges as a citizen of Sparta until he could afford to pay it again.

### PLEDGING MEMBERSHIP TO A SYSSITION

At age twenty, young men finishing from the *agoge* (see page 58) and guided by their *eirenes* (older mentors), pledged themselves for membership to these fraternities.<sup>30</sup> The selection process was simple and democratic; however, just one rejection was enough to ensure that the member would not be able to join.<sup>31</sup> Inclusion was everything, as not being selected to join a *syssition*—or being expelled from one—was a punishment equal to being ostracised and expelled from Sparta itself.

### ACTIVITY

#### CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

1. Outline what *syssitia* attempted to eliminate from Spartan society.
2. Explain what kind of society the *syssitia* aimed to create in Sparta.
3. What is the justification for Spartans requiring a unanimous vote to accept an initiate into a *syssition*?

#### ESSAY

- 'The *syssitia* increased the social cohesiveness of the Spartan state as a whole.' To what extent do you agree with this statement? Use evidence to support your response.
- Discuss why the *syssition* was so important to the Spartan way of life. Use evidence to support your response.

## THE PERIOIKOI

PLUTARCH: 'Once few, if any, *Spartiates* practised a manual craft, the commercial and economic role of the *perioikoi* must have become a very important one.'

The *perioikoi* or 'those who dwell around' were people living in Laconia who had no formal political rights within the Spartan state. *Perioikoi* had many personal and religious freedoms within their own communities. Typically farmers and merchants, *perioikoi* were able to engage in ventures such as trade and agriculture that *Spartiates* were barred from, but they had no right to vote in the *apella*. They served as auxiliaries in the Spartan army, and fought alongside the Spartans during both the Persian and Peloponnesian conflicts.<sup>32</sup> They also built and manned the ships that made up the small Spartan fleet.

*Perioikoi* villages were scattered around the central *polis* of Sparta and operated with autonomy, but with the understanding that they were to follow Spartan rule. The *Spartiates* and *perioikoi* depended on each other; the *Spartiates* provided peace and protection, and the *perioikoi* provided industrial production to feed the Spartan war machine. Despite Xenophon depicting the *perioikoi* as agitators against Spartan rule,<sup>33</sup> it has generally been accepted that these 'fringe dwellers' served Sparta loyally throughout the centuries.<sup>34</sup>

## THE HELOTS

TYRTAEUS: 'Like asses exhausted under great loads, they bring their masters full half the fruit their ploughed land produced.'

The *helots* were the lowest level of Spartan society—a heavily repressed and marginalised slave class. While many *helots* were conquered people from surrounding territory to the north and south of Sparta, the majority of them were the descendants of the people captured during the campaigns against Messenia in the eighth and seventh centuries BCE.

The purpose of this sub-class was to live and work for the continuation of Spartan life. The *helots* had little personal freedom and—unlike slaves elsewhere in Greece—were considered the property of the state, and could not be sold or released except by the Spartan assembly.

Spartan society was built on the backs of the *helots*, who served as the state's agricultural labourers and household servants.<sup>35</sup> They were integral to the Spartan economy, as fully half the entire crop of a *helot* farmer was turned over to the master to feed the master's family and to supply the *syssitia*.<sup>36</sup> The rest of the crop was retained by the *helot*, allowing them to profit from their work and to ensure that their families were fed. Being defined as communal property, corporal punishment of *helots* was unusual, as it was considered to be damaging state resources. *Helots* also retained some social privileges, including marriage rights, and they were able to raise their own families with minimal interference by their Spartan masters.

*Helots* provided the state with a continuous free workforce, also serving as wet nurses, attendants on military campaigns, light infantrymen—and later, as the *Spartiate* population contracted, as *hoplites*.<sup>37</sup> At the Battle of Thermopylae in 480 BCE, there were six *helots* for every *Spartiate*, serving as camp servants, attendants, slingers and javelin throwers. Bravery and loyalty to Sparta at times of

### DID YOU KNOW?

No recipe has survived for *melas zomas*, the Spartan black broth, although the main ingredients are known to be pigs' legs, guts, blood and vinegar. According to legend, the King of Sybaris, a city in southern Italy infamous for excess and gluttony, hired a Spartan chef to prepare this meal for him. Upon ingesting it he remarked, 'Now I know why the Spartans do not fear death', suggesting that it was preferable to die than to consume *melas zomas*.

## ACTIVITY

## CAUSE AND CONSEQUENCE

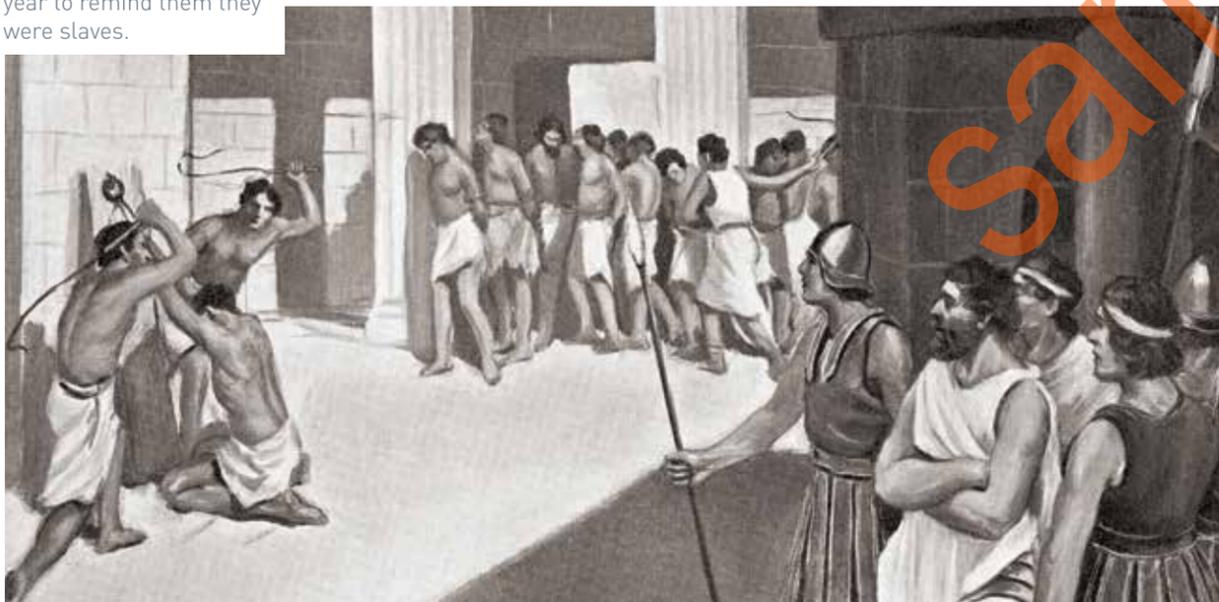
There were many revolts by the *helots* against the Spartans during the Classical Age (500–323 BCE). Choose and research one revolt that occurred, and prepare a short presentation summarising its cause, course and consequences.

## EXTENSION

Split your page into two columns. Under the headings 'Spartans' and 'Helots', list how each group was reliant on the other. Underneath, evaluate the extent to which the Spartans and *helots* depended on each other.

## SOURCE 2.15

The *helots* were beaten by the Spartans once a year to remind them they were slaves.



war could also be rewarded with freedom, leading to the creation of 'new men' (or *neodamodeis*)—freed *helots* who took their place as second-class citizens among the *perioikoi*. Sexual relationships between *Spartiates* and their *helots* were not uncommon; however, any resulting illegitimate children (known as *mothones*) were considered free, but could not become full citizens or vote in the assembly.

## THE REPRESSION OF THE HELOTS

The *helots* were the very foundation of Sparta's wealth and gave *Spartiates* the freedom to be full-time warriors. However, the relationship between the *helots* and their masters was always at boiling point. The Spartans went to war against many different city-states—but their own *helots* would always be their greatest enemies.

Thucydides remarked that the Spartans lived in constant fear of internal revolution.<sup>38</sup> This was because the *helots* were the single largest threat to the Spartan way of life. They were easily the largest class of people living within the Spartan state.

This constant fear of rebellion forced the Spartans to employ extreme measures to ensure the continuation of their way of life. They forced *helots* to wear caps made from dog skins and clothes made from animal skins to distinguish them from the rest of the population. Furthermore, *helots* had no freedom of movement without the permission of the state or their masters. And regardless of how submissive or obedient they were, *helots* were ritually beaten once a year to remind them of their place in society.

Aristotle claimed that life for the *helots* was like that of an enemy sitting constantly in wait for the disasters of Sparta.<sup>39</sup> In the sixth century BCE, a special group, the *krypteia*, was formed to terrorise and repress the *helots* and discourage any organised resistance against the state. Some historians liken the role of the *krypteia* to a Spartan secret police. In a rite of passage, members of the *krypteia* were sent out at night to the countryside with nothing but a cloak and a dagger, with orders to kill any *helots* they found to be acting suspiciously or who might pose a threat to Sparta.

## THE SPARTAN EARTHQUAKE AND HELOT REVOLT

In 464 BCE a massive earthquake rocked the Eurotas Valley. Plutarch regarded it as the greatest yet recorded, killing up to 20 000 Spartans. Sparta's *helots* chose this time to revolt against their weakened masters. Despite Sparta's military prowess, the sheer scale of the revolt and the depletion of *Spartiates* led the *gerousia* to appeal not once, but twice, to their rival Athens for assistance in quelling the revolt.

In 462 BCE, four thousand Athenian *hoplites* under Cimon were sent to assist the Spartans. However, Sparta—fearing that the democratically-minded revolutionary Athenians would be persuaded to switch sides and aid the *helots*—changed their mind and ordered the Athenians to leave. Athens used this insult as an excuse to renounce their formal alliance with Sparta, and tensions between the two city-states would eventually lead to the Peloponnesian War.

The *helot* revolt was subdued after over a decade of fighting. The *helots* that resisted until the end were allowed to leave the Peloponnese under a truce influenced by the Oracle at Delphi. In response to the revolt, the *krypteia* was intensified to ensure such a rebellion never transpired again.

## THE HELOTS AND THE SPARTAN CAMPAIGN OF TERROR

The Spartans were in a precarious position. If they treated their *helots* too strictly, they would become hostile; if they gave them too much freedom, the *helots* would forget their subservient position.<sup>40</sup> To make sure that *helots* never forgot their place, the Spartan state implemented radical policies to keep them submissive and compliant.

Legally, *helots* were held as perpetual enemies of Sparta. Every year the *ephors* would declare war on the *helots* on behalf of the state, to ensure that any murder would be sanctioned and not result in any blood-guilt. These state-sanctioned murders occurred on a 'more or less continual basis'<sup>41</sup> and could be carried out by any Spartan against any *helot*, not just the *helots* that farmed their *kleros*.

The most horrific example of the terrorising of *helots* came during the Peloponnesian War. In 431 BCE, 2000 *helots* who had come to Sparta's aid against Athens were rewarded with olive garlands—a symbol of their emancipation from slavery. They were then led in a procession to a temple outside Sparta—and killed.<sup>42</sup> No justification was made to explain this slaughter.

## HELOTS

The Spartans slaves ... were not chattel slaves but belonged to a category rather unhelpfully called 'between free and slave'... The essential point is that these *helots* as they were known, were not heterogeneous, polyglot 'barbarians' (non-Greeks) bought and sold on the open market, who formed the bulk of the slave populations of most Greek states. The *helots* were in fact themselves Greeks, compelled under pain of instant death to work the lands once owned by their ancestors whom the Spartans had conquered and enslaved.

## SOURCE 2.16

Paul Cartledge, *Spartan Reflections* (California: University of California Press, 2001), 24.

## CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

1. Outline the ways *helots* were both a benefit and a danger to the Spartan state.
2. How did the Spartans distinguish themselves from the *helots*?
3. What did the Spartans do to ensure that their *helots* could not rise up against them?

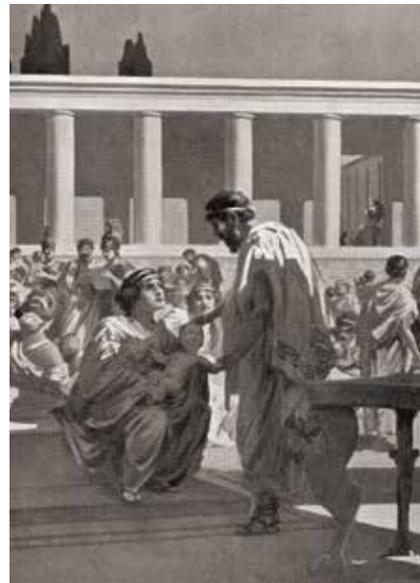
## EARLY LIFE AND EDUCATION

PLATO: 'Education makes a man eagerly pursue the ideal perfection of citizenship, and teaches him how rightly to rule and how to obey.'

Education was at the heart of Spartan ideology.<sup>43</sup> Its aim was to promote military fitness and skill in both its men and women, and to instil obedience to the city-state.<sup>44</sup> While the formal compulsory program for Spartan boys and girls began at the age of seven, the real training began at birth.

When a child was born, its father would take it to a public meeting-house (or *lesche*), where a group of Spartan elders would examine the child for any imperfections or defects. If the child was healthy, it would be returned to the care of the father and mother to be reared for the next seven years. But if the child was deemed ill or imperfect, it would be left at a chasm at the foot of Mt Taygetus to die from exposure.

The Spartans viewed anything less than perfect health as 'weakness'. They believed that 'if nature had not well-prepared a child with health and strength at birth, then it was of no advantage to itself or the state in life.'<sup>45</sup>

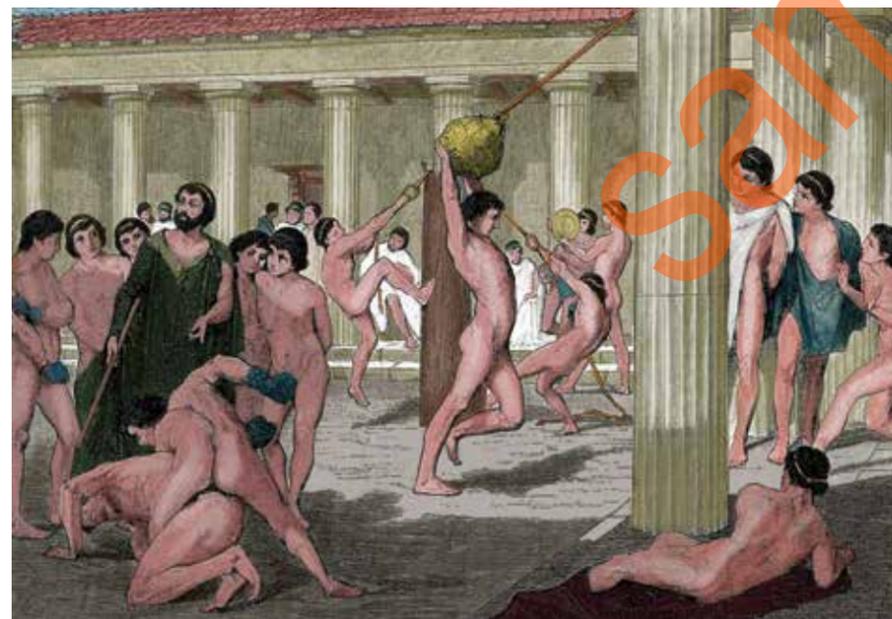


### SOURCE 2.17

State officials examined all newborns in Sparta. If considered weak or deficient, the infants were put outdoors to perish.

## THE AGOGE

PLUTARCH: 'Their whole education was aimed at developing smart obedience, perseverance under stress and victory in battle.'



### SOURCE 2.18

Male Spartan citizens training in the *agoge*.



Acceptance within Spartan society was not based on property or blood, but on graduated degrees of initiation, all beginning with the *agoge*.<sup>46</sup> This institution, designed to turn children into warriors and instil obedience, loyalty and camaraderie was 'obligatory and identical'<sup>47</sup> for all male Spartan children, with only the heirs of the two kings being exempt.

Boys were raised by their mothers until the age of seven, when they joined this military training program designed to teach them to bear hardship, endure pain, learn discipline and become fiercely devoted to the state. Children were enrolled with a pack of boys of a similar age and subjected to a harsh ever-increasing exercise regimen. Boys were forced to sleep rough on a simple bed of reeds and were provided with only one garment to wear, even in wintertime.<sup>48</sup> They went about barefoot, had their heads shaved, and bathed infrequently in the belief that it toughened their skin. Boys were taught to read and write, but only enough so that they would be able to send and receive military orders when they joined the army. Education on written language was nominal to the point where historian Cartledge remarked that the Spartans were almost 'hostile to intellectual culture'.<sup>49</sup>

The rest of their formal education was in discipline, battle and the endurance of hardship. Children were routinely beaten to develop a tolerance to pain and to 'instil in them modesty, humility and obedience'.<sup>50</sup> Once a year they were brought to the Temple of Artemis where their courage was tested by an intense flogging. Those who withstood the whipping without a sound were praised and many stories developed of Spartan boys who allowed themselves to be whipped to death, such was their eagerness not to reveal weakness of any kind.

Boys were also routinely underfed, forcing them to live off the land and to steal to survive. This developed in them stealth and resourcefulness, skills needed for life as a Spartan warrior.<sup>51</sup> If they were discovered stealing, boys were punished viciously—not for the theft, but for being caught.

### HISTORIAN HODKINSON ON BREAKING FAMILY BONDS

At Sparta the upbringing was compulsory and uniform for every boy—with the exception of the immediate heirs to the dual kingship. Its duration was determined by state provision and control of its content was vested in a public official, the *paidonomos* ... Family interests were explicitly obstructed. Even in public the possibility of an exclusive relationship between father and son was prevented: all citizens, regardless of wealth, were given common authority over the boys and youths. The poorest citizen therefore had, in theory, the right of authority over boys from the wealthiest families; the sons of these families were not privileged with a lighter discipline.

### SOURCES AS EVIDENCE

Using Source 2.19 and your own knowledge, respond to the following:

1. What does Hodkinson suggest is the primary purpose of the *agoge* in Sparta?
2. Outline who was excused from the *agoge*. Why do you think this would be the case?
3. Using this extract and your own knowledge, explain how this education program could be considered a great equaliser of Spartan society.

### ACTIVITY

#### CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

1. Who took part in the *agoge* and at what age did it begin?
2. Why were children treated poorly during the *agoge*?
3. What was the aim of the *agoge*?

### DID YOU KNOW?

The most famous story to come from the *agoge* was one of a Spartan boy who had stolen a fox and hidden it under his cloak. According to Plutarch, the fox began to scratch at his side, but when confronted by the authorities he was so determined not to be caught that he stood and let the fox tear out his insides rather than reveal his theft. Only when he fell dead to the ground were the men around him aware of what happened.

### SOURCE 2.19

Stephen Hodkinson, *Property and Wealth in Classical Sparta* (London: The Classical Press of Wales, 2000), 214–215.

### ACTIVITY

## ADOLESCENT EDUCATION

From the age of twelve to the age of twenty, the *agoge* began 'domesticating' the young men and reintroducing them back into traditional Spartan society. Youths now grew their hair as a symbol of maturity. Soldiers in the army wore their hair long and always took pains to keep it combed, even during wartime. A Spartan in his twenties, known as an *eirene*, would become a mentor to the teenager, further educating the young man and advising him on how to act within Spartan society. Sometimes this relationship became homosexual. Young men were taught how to behave, and to act with temperance and restraint. Modesty was prized and became a characteristic feature of Spartan behaviour as students sought to act their best to avoid shaming their mentors.<sup>52</sup> In terms of their verbal culture, adolescents were to speak only when spoken to and to answer questions using the fewest words possible, creating what has become known as 'laconic' speech.

### ➔ SOURCE 2.20

Paul Cartledge, *Spartan Reflections* (California: University of California Press, 2001), 87.

#### MENTORING THE YOUNG

The older partner was supposed therefore to serve for the junior partner as a kind of substitute father and more generally as a role-model, the ideally courageous, resolute and loyal warrior, a paragon of what the Spartans called *andragathia* or 'manly virtue'. One anecdote ... brings about this special educational significance of the pairing relationship particularly neatly. In one of the gruelling physical contests that were the *de rigeur* [required action] for the adolescents a youth reportedly made the mistake of crying out in pain; but in contrast to the situation when one of the younger boys was caught in the act of stealing, it was not the clamant youth himself who was punished—but rather his older mentor, for having failed to inspire in his charge a properly Spartan *karteria* (endurance) and *enkrateia* (self-control).



#### SPARTAN EDUCATION

## LACONIC RESPONSES

According to Thucydides, the Spartans believed that overly wordy exchanges hindered action.<sup>53</sup> They did their best to keep their verbal responses short and let their achievements speak for themselves, prizing 'substance over mere form'.<sup>54</sup> The laconic speech that developed was very curt compared to the more philosophic and verbose speech of the Athenians, and is considered to have created an almost religious aversion to wordiness in the Spartan people.<sup>55</sup>

Below are some of the more famous recorded laconic 'deadly shots'<sup>56</sup>:

- An Athenian once asked how far Sparta's boundaries stretched. King Agesilaus replied, '*As far as our spears can reach.*'
- An orator once declared that the Laonians had no learning. King Pleistoanax responded, '*True, we are the only Hellenes who have not learned any of your evil lessons.*'
- Once a Spartan emissary was asked how many Spartans there were. His response was simply, '*Enough.*'
- Philip II of Macedon, father to Alexander the Great, once sent a message to Sparta stating, 'If I enter Laconia, I will raze Sparta to the ground'. The Spartans responded with a single word: '*If.*'



#### LACONIC RESPONSES



### ➔ SOURCE 2.21

*Young Spartans Exercising* by Edgar Degas, 1860. The girls are urging the boys to wrestle.

## SPARTAN EDUCATION AND THE LOGIC OF INVERSION

The *agoge* was a tumultuous time in the life of a Spartan child. Jean Ducat remarked that the Spartan program followed a 'logic of inversion' where young men were subjected to trials that were 'counter-images of what adult life would become'. First a child was isolated and segregated, then was brought back and forced to assimilate and reintegrate into society. Theft was considered common practice during the *agoge*, yet was illegal as an adult because everything was supplied by the *syssition* and the state. As initiates, children were ritualistically beaten, but later were treated with great respect by their peers. The aim of this process, according to Ducat, was to highlight to those within the *agoge* how *not* to act as an adult by enforcing that experience as a child.<sup>57</sup>

### CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

1. What is laconic speech and why was it valued by the Spartans?
2. Outline the virtues emphasised during a Spartan adolescent's education.
3. Explain why children and adolescents in Sparta were educated in such a rigorous manner. Use evidence to support your response.

### RESEARCH

Research the *Gymnopaedia* festival. Prepare a short speech to the class about the different aspects of this festival and why the Spartans held this celebration every summer.

## MILITARY SERVICE

At the age of twenty Spartans left the *agoge* behind and entered military service. At this time men were deemed to have matured physically: they could now serve in the army, but could not fight in the frontline until the age of twenty-three. They were eligible to join a *syssition* but until the age of thirty they could not vote in the *apella* or set up their own household. As part of their continued training, they also took their place as an *eirene* and were given their own charge of boys to instruct.



### MEET THE SPARTANS

#### SOURCE 2.22

Leonidas bids farewell to allies before the Battle of Thermopylae.



This period in a Spartan's life was one of brutal competition with his peers. Young men competed to join the best *syssitia*, to be given the oldest charges to train, and to prove their martial skill over one another. The very best of this age group were selected to be the king's 300 *hippeis* (horsemen). The most famous group of *hippeis* was that of King Leonidas and his 300 Spartans, who fought at the Battle of Thermopylae in 480 BCE. For Spartan men, this time of their lives cemented the most important values of the state: communal living, military fitness and strength, strict education of the young and constant competition. These values were essential for developing the social cohesion and competitive solidarity upon which the Spartan military depended.<sup>58</sup>

### STAGES OF A SPARTAN BOY'S EDUCATION AND TRAINING

#### PAIDES

AGE  
7–11

Boy taken from his mother. Boys wore a single short tunic and had their heads shaved. Life was harsh, with no luxuries such as bathing. Children were kept in packs to break family ties and routinely starved so they would scrounge and steal for food.

#### PAIDISKOI

AGE  
12–19

Young men were domesticated and brought back into society. Only one cloak was provided per year. Pride in their Spartan descent, discipline and military fitness were cultivated by an older mentoring *eirene*. Laconic speech was encouraged.

#### HEBONTES

AGE  
20–29

Active military service. Men fought in the army, although not on the frontlines until the age of 23. They constantly competed against one another, the best serving in the king's personal bodyguard of 300. Men were encouraged to marry, but had to wait until the age of 30 to receive full citizenship rights.

## SPARTAN WARFARE

TYRTAEUS: 'Let each man bear his shield straight toward the fore-fighters, regarding his own life as hateful and holding the dark spirits of death as dear as the radiance of the sun.'

In 668 BCE, the Spartans were defeated by the Argives at the battle of Hysiai. This setback showed the need to reform the structure and operation of the Spartan military. Until this point, the Spartan army was comprised of well-equipped aristocrats who fought on horseback with commoners who battled as poorly trained and armed infantry units covering their flanks. The Spartans learned from their battle with Argos that undisciplined military units fighting separately were less effective than a single force of well-trained infantry fighting in a coordinated effort. By the end of the seventh century BCE, military reforms disbanded the city's cavalry forces and trained soldiers to work together more effectively.

### THE SPARTAN HOPLITES

LYCURGUS: 'A city is well-fortified which has a wall of men instead of bricks.'

All male citizens from the age of twenty to sixty fought as *hoplite* soldiers in the Spartan army. The standard, state-supplied equipment for every soldier included a *xiphos* (short sword), an eight-foot long spear, plus a helmet, breastplate, thrusting skirt and heavy greaves. However it was the one-metre diameter, seven and a half kilogram *hoplon* that was the defining characteristic of the *hoplite* warrior. Traditionally made out of wood plated with bronze, this concave shield protected infantry from thigh to neck.

Each *hoplite* held the shield in their left hand, protecting half their torso and half the torso of the soldier to their left. It was therefore critical to the safety of the unit that each soldier maintain his position and move in a coordinated way.

The nature of their military training and discipline made Spartan *hoplites* nearly invincible when facing the enemy in attack—and almost useless when their back was turned in retreat, discouraging the practice.

In their time, the Spartans became the single most efficient fighting force in Greece.



#### DID YOU KNOW?

Spartan warriors wore cloaks dyed blood red to symbolise their equality and uniformity, but also to camouflage any injuries they may suffer in battle. This way their enemies never saw them bleed.

#### DID YOU KNOW?

Spartans who lost their helmet or breastplate were not punished, but those who returned without their shields were shamed and dishonoured. This was because the helmet and breastplate were for individual protection, but the shield protected all the men on the frontline, and Sparta itself.



KEY SPARTAN BATTLES: MORE INFO

#### DID YOU KNOW?

The Spartan exercise program during peacetime was very exhausting, lasting many hours every day. However, while on campaign, Sparta's commanders relaxed the amount of exercise soldiers had to complete, so soldiers found going to war less exhausting than training for it.

#### SOURCE 2.23

Spartan *hoplite*.

## GIRLS AND WOMEN

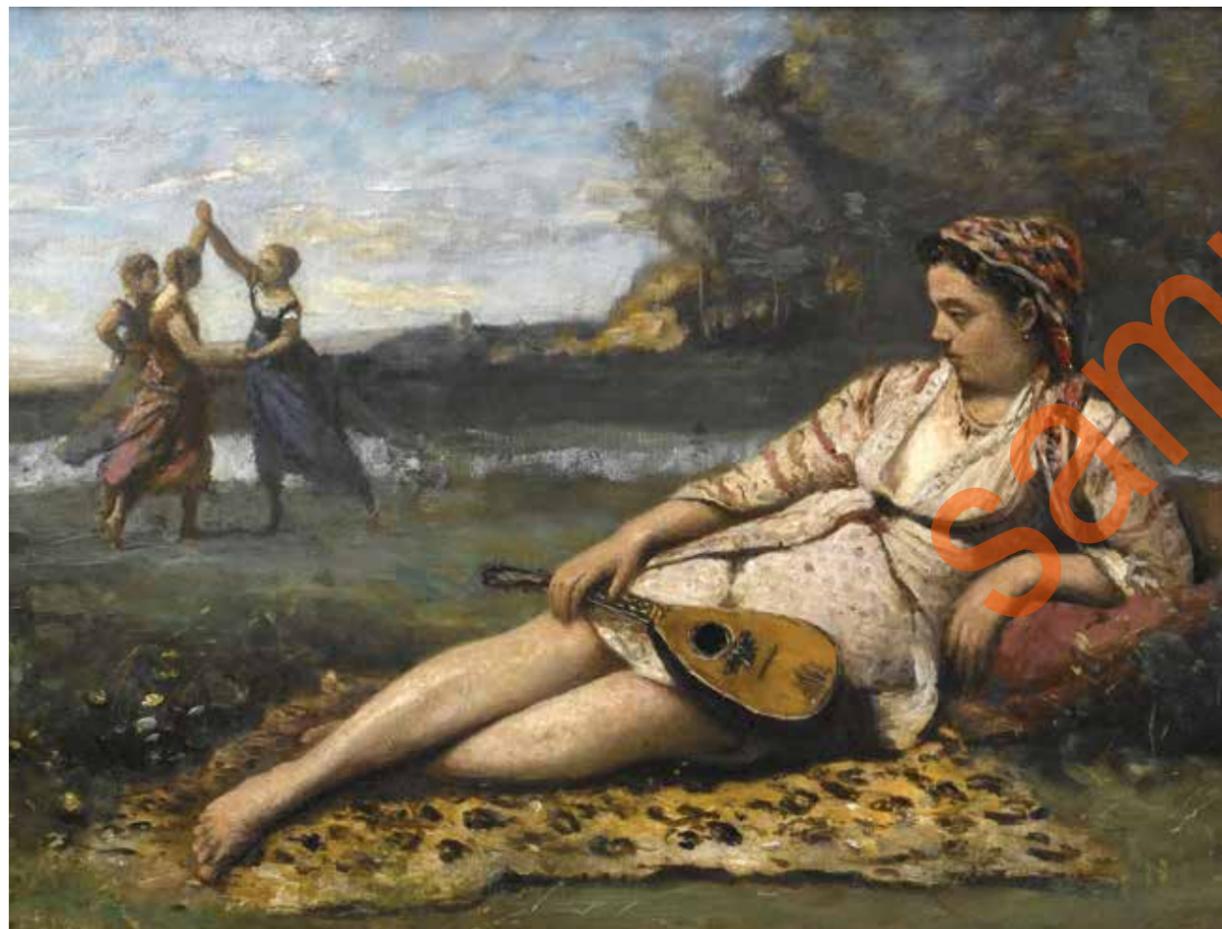
**PLATO:** 'Women abstain from wool-work, but weave themselves instead a life that is not trivial at all nor useless, but arduous.'

Nowhere else in ancient Greece did girls and women within a citizen population enjoy more rights and suffer fewer restrictions than in Sparta. Spartan women possessed some degree of freedom of speech and took part in important decision-making made by the state.<sup>59</sup> The law dictated that female infants and children were to be provided with the same amount of food as their male counterparts and, like boys, the state dictated that all girls received compulsory public education when they reached their seventh birthday. This included the study of poetry, history, drama, art, music and even some reading and writing, placing Spartan women in a more educated position than most other young women in Greece.

Spartan girls were expected to be fit and healthy, and frequently engaged in physical competitions of their own to promote athleticism and to prepare them for their later role as women and mothers.<sup>60</sup> At times they trained naked, or wore a short tunic that was considered quite immodest outside of Sparta.<sup>61</sup> Girls regularly engaged in foot races, wrestling and throwing the discus and javelin, similar exercises to those carried out by boys their age. Frequently their training took place in front of men, indicating that the stigma associated with women in public did not exist to the same degree within Sparta as it did elsewhere in Greece.

### SOURCE 2.24

*Young Women of Sparta*  
by Camille Corot, from  
about 1870.



The major test for girls occurred when they turned eighteen years old. They were submitted to a citizenship test and had to prove their worth to the state through a series of physical and mental examinations. If they passed, they were given their citizenship; if they failed they became *perioikoi*. The education of Spartan girls was aimed at:

- raising women who would adhere to the ideals of the state
- producing mothers who would give birth to physically healthy children.

## MARRIAGE AND FAMILY LIFE

**GORGO, QUEEN OF SPARTA:** 'When asked by an Athenian woman, "Why is it you Spartan women are the only ones who rule over your men?" Gorgo replied: "Because we are the only women who give birth to real men."' <sup>62</sup>

Women played an important role in Spartan society. Despite being more empowered than their Athenian counterparts, to the point where historian Brown remarks that 'it was at Sparta that women had freedom and dignity',<sup>63</sup> Spartan women were just as duty-bound as their men to the needs of their city, being expected to bear as many healthy children as they could for the state.<sup>64</sup> Somewhat contradictory to this position, women's sexual development was not rushed in Sparta as it was in other Greek *poleis*. Spartan law forbade the marriage of girls until they were 'old enough to enjoy the sexual experience'.<sup>65</sup> Most girls were also wed in their late teenage years as opposed to their early-to-mid teens elsewhere in Greece. Furthermore, the age difference between married Spartan men and women was much lower than in other cities—on average, men were only about five years older than their wives.

Even after marriage, a Spartan wife remained with her family until her husband turned thirty. After that she would renounce her old paternal family and become integrated with her husband's family.<sup>66</sup> However, as men spent most of their time in the *syssition*, this resulted in women becoming the 'matriarchs of the household',<sup>67</sup> taking charge of the *kleros* and the *helots* that worked it, which gave them some measure of control over the agricultural system of the state itself. According to Aristotle, Spartan women controlled 40 per cent of the land in Sparta thanks to this unique social practice.<sup>68</sup> The elevated status of Spartan women in terms of land ownership and household control led many to believe that Sparta's womenfolk 'exhibited an extraordinary degree of economic activity and personal independence'.<sup>69</sup>

However, women could never escape their 'primary importance as producers of children', which was so important to Sparta's survival. Measures were put in place to make sure that women and men fulfilled their responsibilities to the state.<sup>70</sup> Unmarried men in Sparta were subjected to public humiliation, and women did not stay unmarried for long. Prostitution was openly banned, yet the sharing of wives was not uncommon. If a Spartan could not conceive a child because of his age or inability, his wife could be instructed to bear a child from another, younger man. Women within Sparta had a reputation for chastity, but were expected to follow orders if the state chose a sexual partner for them for the direct purpose of producing strong offspring. Despite this intense focus on compelling women to produce as many healthy children as possible, the declining number of *Spartiates*, from 9000 in 640 BCE to less than 1000 in 330 BCE, suggests that this process was not very effective and, according to Aristotle, counterproductive.<sup>71</sup>

 GORGO, QUEEN OF SPARTA: MORE INFO

### DID YOU KNOW?

A Spartan king was subject to the same laws and customs as his subjects. King Archidamus was reprimanded and fined by the *ephors* for marrying a small wife because the people believed she would give birth to 'small princes'.

 SPARTAN FAMILY LIFE: EXTENSION

 WOMEN AND GIRLS IN OTHER CITY-STATES: RESEARCH

### DID YOU KNOW?

Spartans buried their dead, but only men who fell in battle and women who died in childbirth were given tombstones inscribed with their names. Such was the reverence provided to women as child-bearers in Sparta.

**SOURCE 2.25**

Paul Cartledge, *Spartan Reflections* (California: University of California Press, 2001), 84.

**HISTORIAN CARTLEDGE ON BREAKING THE FAMILY UNIT**

Indeed, right from his birth ... the Spartan state had intervened in a boy's life-trajectory at the expense of parental initiative and control. For it was not the boy's father who, as in other Greek states, decided the matter of private business whether he was fit to be reared: that was the task of the elders. If the tribal elders' decision was negative, the infant's fate was to be hurled, as an unperson, a non-entity ... into the mountain chasm known euphemistically as the 'Deposits'. That though, was just the first of an endless series of official measures illustrating another general feature of Spartan social organisation, namely the concerted and determined effort to minimise the importance of the family—or, to be more accurate, family life—and to emphasise rather the cardinal and overriding significance of communal ties.

**SOURCE 2.26**

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Government of Poland*, trans. Willmore Kendall (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1985).

**ROUSSEAU ON THE SPIRIT OF ANCIENT INSTITUTIONS**

He [Lycurgus] fixed upon [the Spartans] a yoke of iron, the like of which no other people has ever born; but he tied them to that yoke, made them, so to speak, one with it, by filling up every moment of their lives. He saw to it that the image of the fatherland was constantly before their eyes—in their laws, in their games, in their homes, in their mating, in their feasts. He saw to it that they never had an instant of free time that they could call their own. And out of this ceaseless constraint, made noble by the purpose it served, was born that burning love of country which was always the strongest—or rather the only—passion of the Spartans, and which transformed them into beings more than merely human. Sparta, to be sure, was only a city; but the sheer force of its legislation made it lawgiver and capital to all of Greece and caused the Persian empire to tremble.

ACTIVITY

**SOURCES AS EVIDENCE**

Using Sources 2.25 and 2.26 and your own knowledge, respond to the following:

1. When did the Spartan state first interfere in family life?
2. How important were a child's parents in the raising of their offspring?
3. What happened to children who were not 'fit to be reared'?
4. What does Cartledge consider to be primary feature of the Spartan social organisation?
5. According to Rousseau, how were Spartans tied to their homeland?
6. Using the sources and your own knowledge, explain the purpose and end result of the 'ceaseless constraint' imposed upon the Spartans.
7. Using the sources provided and your own knowledge, evaluate the extent to which Sparta could be considered a typical Greek polis.

**BELIEFS AND VALUES**

1. What similarities existed in the education of both boys and girls?
2. In what ways did their educations differ?
3. What was considered the chief role of women in Sparta?
4. How did the Spartan state encourage women to achieve this aim?
5. Even after they married, men still spent a majority of their time in the *syssition* instead of with their families. Why was this the case?

**HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE**

**THE REFORMS OF LYCURGUS**

The social reforms attributed to Lycurgus fundamentally altered the structure of Spartan society. Not only were the old family and clan ties abandoned and new social classes established, but now every citizen had strict duties to fulfil: men to become warriors, women to provide children for Sparta's future armies.

Vast networks of *perioikoi* and *helots* were established to support the lives of the Spartans so they could carry out their civic responsibilities more easily. However, the *helot* population would soon become overbearing, and devastate the Spartan state in numerous revolts over the centuries. In response, Sparta's education system and military reforms created Greece's first disciplined and professional standing army, allowing Sparta to keep the *helots* under control—and to dominate the Peloponnese.

**COMPARATIVE TASK**

Create a table like the one below and fill in the missing information.

	SPARTAN MEN	SPARTAN WOMEN	PERIOIKOI	HELOTS	CHILDREN
Defining characteristics					
Main duties and responsibilities					
How they were treated by the state					
Where they generally resided					
Quotations by ancient thinkers concerning this group					
Quotations by modern writers concerning this group					

**ESSAY**

Write an essay on the following topic. Your essay should be approximately 800 words long and include an introduction, three body paragraphs and a conclusion:

'The reforms implemented in Sparta created a society more egalitarian and free than any other in the Greek world.' To what extent do you agree with this assessment? Use evidence including historical interpretations to support your response.

ACTIVITY

**THE SPARTAN ECONOMY**

PROVERB BY DIODORUS: 'Greed will destroy Sparta, but nothing else.'

The major reforms Sparta put in place in the seventh and sixth centuries BCE sought to create an egalitarian state free of avarice, greed and materialism. However, these reforms required the complete rejection of the old Spartan economic system. The new laws imposed commercial isolation on the Spartans, seeking to remove them from the race to acquire material wealth—a problem that was seen to plague other Greek city-states. The Spartans' status as equals, as *homoioi*, now extended to the economic sphere as well as the social and

political spheres. Industry, craft and trade for the state would be taken up by the surrounding *perioikoi*, as agricultural production remained the role of the ever-increasing *helot* population.

## COMMERCE, TRADE AND WEALTH

In 724 BCE, at the end of the First Messenian War, Sparta annexed neighbouring Messenia and doubled the scale of its agricultural production. The acquisition of this surplus land countered the expansion of rival states such as Athens and allowed Sparta to be a self-sufficient agricultural state without the need for foreign trade.



### SOURCE 2.27

*Spartiates* had to eat all meals together in public mess-halls. The public tables were furnished simply and everyone ate the same food.

By about 650 BCE, Spartans had become only 'craftsmen of military affairs'<sup>72</sup> as engaging in any trade or craft for the purpose of making money was now illegal. To facilitate these financial prohibitions—and to defend the ideological conservatism of the Spartans—all foreigners were expelled from Sparta, thus limiting access to potential trading partners. However, despite Plutarch's claim that no merchant-seamen brought freight into Sparta's harbours, trade was still carried out by *perioikoi* at the Spartan port of Gytheion.<sup>73</sup> The central Spartan *polis* was devoid of all non-essential service industries. There were no freelance artisans, poets or foreign tutors, prostitution was banned, and the only metalworkers that existed were *perioikoi* who smithed with tin, copper, bronze and iron for the Spartan army.

In an effort to further discourage trade between Sparta and the outside world, some ancient sources tell us that the Spartans abandoned the simple coinage that had been in use and introduced in its place a new currency of heavy iron bars. These bars, 'large of weight and small of value'<sup>74</sup> that 'would fill a large space and need a wagon to draw it'<sup>75</sup> were used to discourage any outsider from attempting to trade with the Spartans. It became almost impossible to accumulate wealth. Even if a Spartan managed to engage in blackmarket trade, he would find it too difficult to store, transport or spend any of his money because of its size and weight.

## PERSPECTIVES ON IRON MONEY

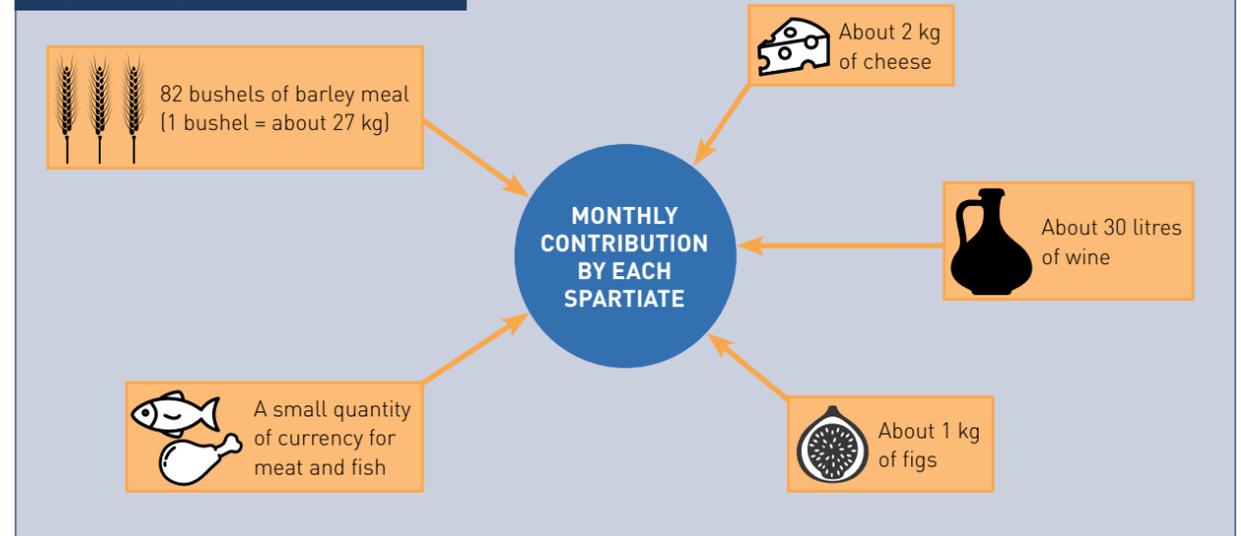
Whether or not the Spartans actually possessed and used unwieldy iron bars as an official currency has been hotly debated. Despite Xenophon and Plutarch's insistence that Sparta had no need for a system of coins,<sup>76</sup> iron currency has been labelled by Hodkinson as a 'post-hoc construction'<sup>77</sup> made up to explain the reason for Sparta's decline in later centuries, just as Cartledge dismissed its use as an 'invented tradition'.<sup>78</sup> Additionally, while Hooker agrees with the ancients, claiming that the iron currency was the only one tolerated in Sparta,<sup>79</sup> he is refuted by Mitchell and Cawkwell who remark that the notion of money ever being forbidden is an absolute 'fairy tale'<sup>80</sup> and that the Spartans must have always had some form of coinage acceptable to the rest of the Greeks.<sup>81</sup>

## TAXATION

Despite their alleged deviation from a formal system of currency, taxation still existed within Sparta, although at a lesser rate than other Greek city-states. There was no need for large state revenue as public expenses in Sparta were quite low.<sup>82</sup> Public buildings were simple, the army requisitioned most of what they required while on campaign, and there was no specialised police force. The only real public expenses to the state were the king's mess duties and sacrificial offerings, which were supplied by the *perioikoi*. Regular direct taxation of citizens and their property was regarded as an 'intolerable mark of degradation and tyranny',<sup>83</sup> which the Spartans greatly opposed. While a father of four sons was exempt from all duties,<sup>84</sup> all other Spartiates had to:

- provide food for their sons during their passage through the *agoge*
- contribute a levy of foodstuffs to the state while Sparta was at war
- pay monthly fees to retain membership to their *syssition*.

### FIXED CONTRIBUTION TO THE SYSSITION



## ATTITUDE TO WEALTH

Lycurgus was said to have not only changed Spartan laws relating to wealth—but also to have changed the mindset of his people. The *agoge* and its uniform education of children was an 'important institutional constraint on the influence of wealth'<sup>85</sup> as it ensured that all Spartan children, regardless of affluence or aristocratic background, shared and came to value the same austere upbringing. Spartan culture discouraged the explicit ways in which the rich in other Greek city-states displayed their wealth—extravagant houses, jewellery, clothes and furniture were forbidden. Furthermore, any Spartan who engaged in foreign trade, bribery or embezzlement lost his citizenship and was expelled from the city. Despite the efforts made to prohibit extravagance and trade, Finley has argued that this never completely eliminated the desire for wealth in Sparta.<sup>86</sup> There are scattered examples of Spartans who broke these laws, most ending in disaster and ruin.

### ➔ SOURCE 2.28

*Plutarch, Lycurgus 13.3–4, trans. Bernadotte Perrin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1914).*

### PLUTARCH ON THE DECREE AGAINST LUXURY

Another [rhetra] was directed against extravagance, ordaining that every house should have its roof fashioned by the axe, and its doors by the saw only, and by no other tool. For, as in later times Epaminondas is reported to have said at his own table, that such a meal did not comport with treachery, so Lycurgus was the first to see clearly that such a house does not comport with luxury and extravagance. Nor is any man so vulgar and senseless as to introduce into a simple and common house silver-footed couches, purple coverlets, gold drinking-cups, and all the extravagance which goes along with these, but one must of necessity adapt and proportion his couch to his house, his coverlets to his couch, and to this the rest of his supplies and equipment.

## CONFLICTING PERSPECTIVES ON THE SPARTAN ECONOMY

The Spartan attitude to commerce, wealth and trade led to much controversy among the historians of the ancient world.

### PLATO ON SPARTAN WEALTH

For in this respect you have only to look at the wealth of the Spartans, and you will perceive that our riches here are far inferior to theirs. Think of all the land that they have both in their own and in the Messenian country: not one of our estates could compete with theirs in extent and excellence, nor again in ownership of slaves, and especially of those of the helot class, nor yet of horses, nor of all the flocks and herds that graze in Messene. However, I pass over all these things: but there is more gold and silver privately held in Lacedaemon than in the whole of Greece; for during many generations treasure has been passing in to them from every part of Greece, and often from the barbarians also, but not passing out to anyone ... so that one can be pretty sure that those people are the richest of the Greeks in gold and silver, and that among themselves the richest is the king; for the largest and most numerous receipts of the kind are those of the kings and besides there is the levy of the royal tribute in no slight amount, which the Spartans pay to their kings.

### ➔ SOURCE 2.29

*Plato, Alcibiades 1.122e–123b, trans. Bernadotte Perrin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1916).*

### ARISTOTLE ON SPARTAN FINANCE

The public finance of Sparta is badly regulated: when compelled to carry on wars on a large scale she has nothing in the state treasury, and the Spartiates pay war taxes badly because, as most of the land is owned by them, they do not scrutinize each other's contributions. And the lawgiver has achieved the opposite result to what is advantageous—he has made the state poor and the individual citizen covetous.

### ➔ SOURCE 2.30

*Aristotle, Politics 2.1271b, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1944).*

### HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

Using Sources 2.29 and 2.30 and your own knowledge, respond to the following:

1. Outline Plato's views on the wealth contained in Sparta.
2. What does Aristotle have to say about Spartan finances and financial practice?
3. Explain why the two accounts might differ so radically.
4. Evaluate the extent to which Sparta was a poor city-state. Use evidence to support your response.

### CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

1. What was the only craft Spartans were permitted to carry out? Who took up responsibility for all the rest?
2. Outline three ways that rich people displayed their wealth in other Greek cities, which were discouraged in Sparta.
3. How did the Spartans feel about direct taxation? What duties were they still expected to pay and who was exempt from this responsibility?

### SUMMARY

The Spartans implemented strict economic policies to ensure that their citizens would retain their position as equals. Write a 250-word report summarising at least three of these policies and the impact they had on the Spartan population.

### EXTENSION

1. Explain how economic policy brought about social reform in Sparta.
2. How were Spartans able to give up nearly every form of economic trade and production without their *polis* collapsing?
3. How might Sparta's economic practices affect other Greek cities inside the Peloponnese and in the rest of Greece?

## PERIOIKOI AND INDUSTRY

Economic development and industrial production in Sparta was rich and versatile before the reforms as Laconian pottery and ivory work were exported all across the Mediterranean.<sup>87</sup> Archaeological remains of drinking cups (*kylikes*), mixing bowls (*krateres*) and oil flasks (*aryballoi*) have been found as far away as Samos, Taras and Cyrenaica. However, by the end of the seventh century BCE this flow of commerce stagnated as a 'formal prohibition'<sup>88</sup> forbade Spartans to toil on anything but the battlefield, leaving all other industrial activity to the *perioikoi*. Sparta's neighbours quickly monopolised the production and trade of all goods in Laconia; they supplied armour to the army, built the ships used to transport goods and soldiers, and maintained the small Spartan navy.<sup>89</sup> Foreign merchandise such

## DID YOU KNOW?

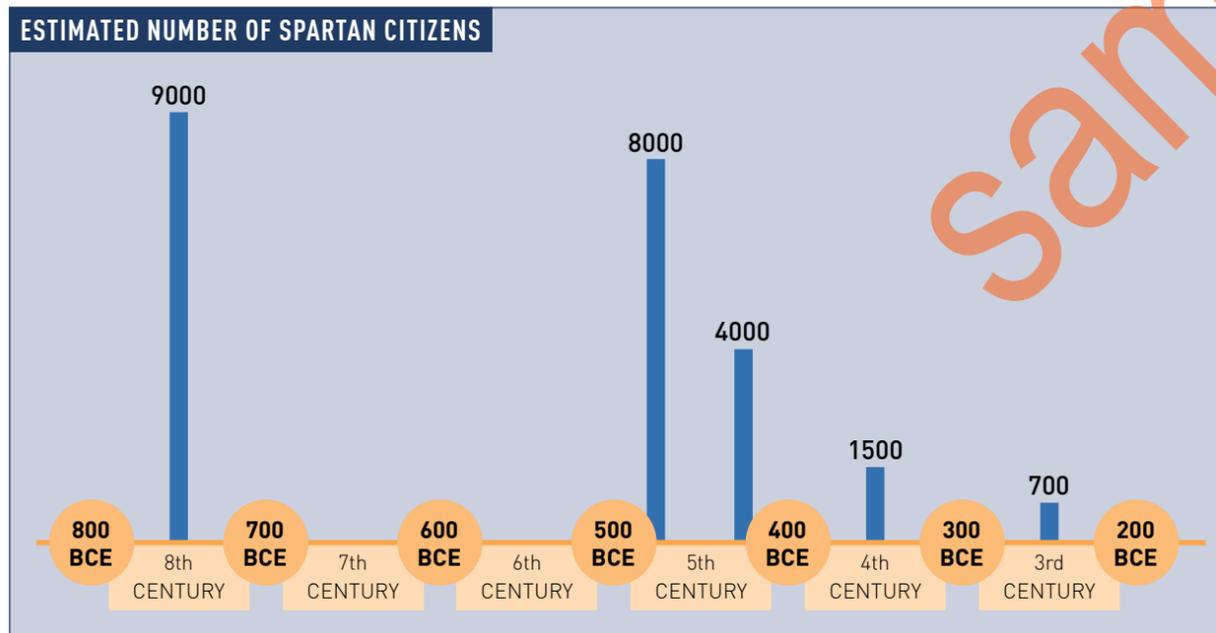
The Spartans aversion to excess became so well known that decking a room out in a 'Spartan' style is still recognised today as one that is plain and devoid of luxury.

as fine cloth and artistic pottery was banned in Sparta, and the few commercial goods found in the city were all simple, functional and plain. Cups and pots were constructed to serve a practical purpose and were not decorated—unlike those found in Athens or Thebes. The Spartans preferred their goods devoid of unnecessary embellishment, as it freed their artisans from useless tasks, while they saw the 'beauty of workmanship not in its pointless exterior, but in the object's constant and necessary use'.<sup>90</sup>

## LAND

Lycurgus was said to have completely redistributed Sparta's land. Overall, 9000 lots (or *kleroi*) were provided to the *Spartiates* and 30 000 more to the *perioikoi*. Thanks to this redistribution, even the poorest citizen of Sparta was lifted above a subsistence lifestyle, and now possessed more land than the poorest citizens in other *poleis*.<sup>91</sup> The foundation of the Spartan economy shifted away from industry and commerce and now rested on these *kleroi* (singular: *kleros*) and the *helots* who worked them. *Helot* families worked Spartan farmland to produce the quota needed by their master for membership to his *syssition*. Each plot was evenly measured to produce 100 *medimnoi*—about thirty tonnes of wheat.

Land-holdings were private, but each plot was indivisible under Spartan law; property could not be split or sold, only inherited. Both sons and daughters could inherit from their parents, with girls usually obtaining a half portion of what their brothers received.<sup>92</sup> If a family had no sons, the eldest daughter inherited all the land and held ownership of it until it passed to the next male heir. Due to these issues with land—and despite the state's constant encouragement to produce offspring—some Spartan families raised only a few children in order to limit the risk of their sons not being able to own enough property to pay their *syssition* fees. This practice, in addition to the Spartan practice of leaving weak babies outside to die, their relatively late marriage age, brutal training methods and the constant military campaigning from the sixth to fourth centuries BCE, led to the dwindling of the Spartan population across the centuries.



## DIFFERING PERSPECTIVES ON SPARTAN LAND REFORM

## PLUTARCH ON LAND REFORM

A second, and a very bold political measure of Lycurgus, is his redistribution of the land. For there was a dreadful inequality in this regard, the city was heavily burdened with indigent and helpless people, and wealth was wholly concentrated in the hands of a few. Determined, therefore, to banish insolence and envy and crime and luxury, and those yet more deep-seated and afflictive diseases of the state, poverty and wealth, he persuaded his fellow-citizens to make one parcel of all their territory and divide it up anew, and to live with one another on a basis of entire uniformity and equality in the means of subsistence, seeking pre-eminence through virtue alone, assured that there was no other difference or inequality between man and man than that which was established by blame for base actions and praise for good ones.

## SOURCE 2.31

Plutarch, *Lycurgus* 8.1, trans. Bernadotte Perrin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1914).

## ARISTOTLE ON LAND REFORM

The mention of avarice [greed] naturally suggests a criticism on the inequality of property. While some of the Spartan citizenry have quite small properties, others have very large ones; hence the land has passed into the hands of a few. And this is due also to faulty laws; for, although the legislator rightly holds up to shame the sale or purchase of an inheritance, he allows anybody who likes to give or bequeath it. Yet both practices lead to the same result. And nearly two-fifths of the whole country is held by women; this is owing to the number of heiresses and to the large dowries which are customary. It would surely have been better to have given no dowries at all, or, if any, but small or moderate ones. As the law now stands, a man may bestow his heiress on any one whom he pleases, and, if he dies intestate, the privilege of giving her away descends to his heir. Hence, although the country is able to maintain 1500 cavalry and 30 000 hoplites, the whole number of Spartan citizens fell below 1000. The result proves the faulty nature of their laws respecting property; for the city sank under a single defeat; the want of men was their ruin.

## SOURCE 2.32

Aristotle, *Politics* 2.6.10–13, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1944).

## HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

Using Sources 2.31 and 2.32 and your own knowledge, respond to the following:

1. What is Plutarch's attitude towards the land reform policies implemented by Lycurgus?
2. For what reasons does Aristotle criticise the distribution of property in Sparta?
3. Which argument do you think is more convincing? Why?
4. Evaluate the extent to which land ownership was fair and equal among the citizens of Sparta. Use the sources, differing historical interpretations and your own evidence to support your response.

## ACTIVITY

## ECONOMIC INEQUALITY

Despite the ideological and material equality of the reforms of the seventh century BCE, by the fifth century BCE Spartan citizens still differed by birth, age and attainment.<sup>93</sup> There were still considerable differences in wealth among the populace and the fairness they advocated was more propaganda than reality.<sup>94</sup> Due to the city's complex system of inheritance, some Spartan men and women controlled more than one *kleros*.

Also, while Spartans could not share or divide a single parcel of land, some first-born sons still inherited their parents' holdings even after receiving an allocation of land from the state. If a *Spartiate* had no children when he died, his wife retained control of his land. When she remarried, the new family could then have access to even more *kleroi*. Millender claims that in this way women became a 'valuable commodity'; at times marriages became tactical in order to increase the size of landholdings.<sup>95</sup> By the end of the fifth century BCE, the transmission of private estates culminated in a growing aristocratic class of citizens, in direct opposition to the ideals of the *polis*.<sup>96</sup>

This ever-growing divide in Sparta created many social and economic problems, undermining the city's atmosphere of equality and classlessness. In times of drought and flood, some *Spartiates* could not keep up with payments to their *syssition*. These men lost their citizenship, becoming 'inferiors' (or *hypomeiones*) with no political rights. Until they married a prosperous heiress or found the wealth to once again pay their *syssition* fees, they were stripped of their right to take part in the assembly or to have their vote counted.

Strategic marriages became a method to multiply landholdings and amass greater fortunes. This led to the creation of a wealthier class of Spartan citizen—a far cry from the original *rhetra*, which sought to homogenise the Spartan citizenry.



THE 'LAWS OF LYCURGUS' AND SPARTAN SUCCESS

➔ SOURCE 2.33

Stephen Hodkinson, *Property and Wealth in Classical Sparta* (London: The Classical Press of Wales, 2000), 104.

HISTORIAN HODKINSON ON WEALTH INEQUALITY AMONG SPARTIATES

Certainly, there were major changes in the distribution of land ... Although there was never the wholesale redistribution of land described in Plutarch's [Lycurgus], there must at some point in the seventh or sixth centuries have been some significant allocation of land, possibly in the newly-acquired territory [Messenia], to poorer citizens, in order to sustain them viably as full-time hoplite warriors who did not support themselves by working for their own living. Although there was never a system of equal *kleroi*—at least before the third-century revolution—and there were always some wealthy families, the overall distribution of land was surely more evenly spread at the start ... than at the end. The decline of Spartiate citizen numbers in the fifth and fourth centuries was surely grounded in increasing inequalities of wealth. Aristotle seems to imply as much in his comment and 'the land has fallen into the hands of the few'.

➔ SOURCE 2.34

Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* 5.20, trans. C. D. Yonge (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1854).

PHYLARCHUS, QUOTED IN ATHENAEUS

[Over time, the Spartans gave up] assembling for the *syssitia*, according to the custom of their country, and whenever they met, after having had a few things brought round, for the sake of a seeming compliance with the law, other things were then prepared; couches furnished in a very expensive way and of exceeding size and all differing from one another in their adornment; so that some of the strangers who were invited used to be afraid to put their elbows on the pillows; and those who formerly used to rest on a bare bench during the whole banquet, perhaps once leaning on their elbows for a few minutes, had now come to such a pitch of luxury as I have spoken of, and to a serving up of many cups of wine, and of all sorts of food procured from all countries and dressed in every kind of luxurious way; and besides that, they had come to use foreign perfumes, and also foreign wines and sweetmeats.

HISTORICAL INTERPRETATIONS

Using Sources 2.33 and 2.34 and your own knowledge, respond to the following:

1. What does Hodkinson suggest about this distribution of land in Sparta? How does this compare with what Lycurgus was said to have established?
2. In what ways is Phylarchus critical of the Spartans? What customs does he identify them breaking?
3. Explain the relationship between Spartan citizenship and economic position.
4. Evaluate the extent to which the reforms to the Spartan economy achieved their aims. Use the sources, differing historical interpretations and your own evidence to support your response.

ACTIVITY

ECONOMICS AND LYCURGUS' 'PERFECT STATE'

Lycurgus had supposedly sought to create the perfect state populated by the perfect citizenry. However, by the fifth century BCE, Lycurgus' dream of a perfect Spartan utopia was still out of reach, partly due to the laws on land allocation and inheritance. The unforgiving *syssition* regulations also produced a growing class of *hypomeiones* who would find it increasingly difficult to regain their citizenship because of the embargo on trade.

SUMMARY

Construct a table similar to this, summarising the key details for each of the following areas of the Spartan economic system.

	KEY DETAILS	ANCIENT PERSPECTIVES	MODERN PERSPECTIVES
Taxation			
Commerce and trade			
Coinage			
Land			
Inheritance			

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

Imagine you are a Spartan man, woman, *perioikoi* or *helot*. Write a speech outlining your thoughts about the reforms to the economy as if they have just been implemented. Include as much factual material as you can in your account.

ESSAY

Write an essay on the following topic. Your essay should be approximately 800 words long and include an introduction, three body paragraphs and a conclusion:

'The economic reforms implemented in Sparta sought freedom from materialism and financial equality between all citizens. They succeeded as much as they failed.' To what extent do you agree with this assessment? Use evidence including historical interpretations to support your response.

ACTIVITY



## RELIGION

Spartans were a deeply religious people who worshipped many gods, a doctrine known as *polytheism*. The gods revered by the Spartans were the same as those worshipped by other Greeks, and included:

- Zeus—the king of all the Greek gods
- Athena—the goddess of wisdom and strategy
- Apollo—the god of music and prophecy
- Ares—the god of war.



Spartans would not go to war without the blessing of the gods, nor engage in any major conflict without first consulting their oracles to ensure divine favour. The kings of Sparta were the high priests of the city and held many religious obligations, such as sacrificing a goat on the eve of every battle.



### SOURCE 2.35

From top to bottom: Zeus, Athena, Apollo, Ares.

## RELIGIOUS FESTIVALS

### THE HYACINTHIA

The *Hyacinthia* was a major Spartan festival that celebrated Hyacinthos and the god Apollo. According to myth, Apollo loved the young man Hyacinthos, but accidentally killed him with the throw of a discus. Apollo did not allow Hades, the god of the underworld, to take Hyacinthos. Instead Apollo grew a flower from the young man's blood—the flower we now call a hyacinth.

As the hyacinth is a plant that renews itself each year, the *Hyacinthia* represented the Spartan's belief in honouring the fallen, the celebration of life and the cycle of death and rebirth. The first day of the *Hyacinthia* mourned the passing of the youth with a ban on merriment, the eating of bread and cakes, and a day of ritual grieving. The second and third days of *Hyacinthia* were then a celebration of his life and rebirth. In the spirit of friendship that accompanied the *Hyacinthia*, *helots* and foreigners could also take part in the celebration as, according to Athenaeus, the Spartans 'treat not only their countrymen, but any foreigners who happen by'.<sup>97</sup>

### THE CARNEIA

The *Carneia* was a festival held to honour Apollo Carneus—god of flocks, harvest and vintage. The *Carneia* ran for nine days, from the seventh to fifteenth of *Carneios* (August). The myth tells the story of the ancient seer Carneus who was killed by a descendent of Heracles, the ancestor of the Spartans. The festival of the *Carneia* was penance to alleviate the blood-guilt of this act and to ward off the Furies—the Greek goddesses of punishment and vengeance.



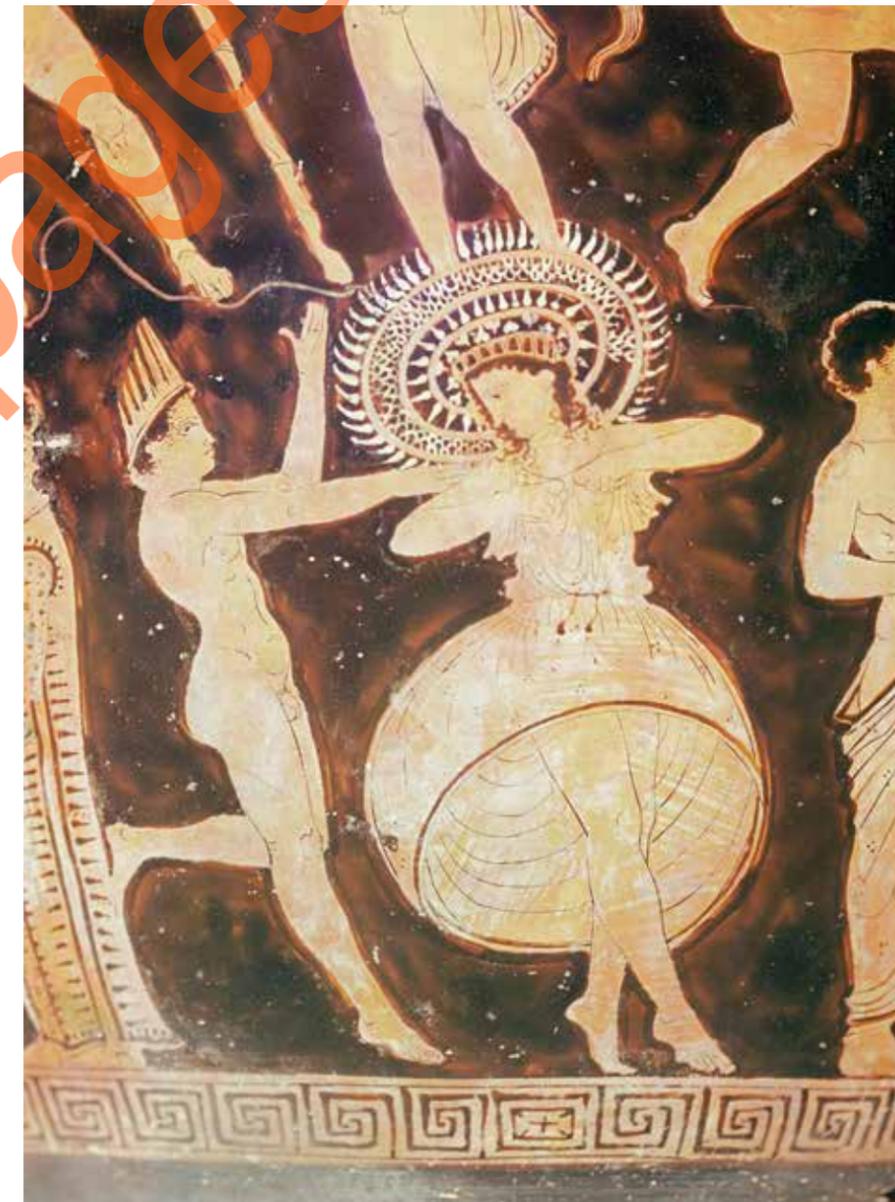
THE CARNEIA:  
MORE INFO

A sacred truce (or *hieromenia*) was declared during all major religious festivals, suspending all military campaigning. These truces impacted on Sparta's ability as a military force, as they delayed Spartan assistance of the Athenians at Marathon in 490 BCE and may have been a reason for the token force of Spartans under Leonidas at the Battle of Thermopylae in 480 BCE.

### CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

1. What role did oracles play in determining Spartan warfare?
2. In what other ways did religion impact on Sparta's military activities?
3. Was religion a way in which the Spartans were similar to other Greeks?

ACTIVITY



### SOURCE 2.36

Dancers during a festival.

## CONCLUSION

While many of the growing Greek *poleis* in the Archaic Age were focusing on colonisation in other areas of the Mediterranean and Black Seas, the Spartans instead turned on their fellow-Greeks. The neighbouring Messenians were conquered by the Spartans in the eighth century BCE. Their land was redistributed among the Spartans and the people were reduced to *helots*.

Starting in the seventh century BCE, a number of radical reforms to Spartan society were implemented. A political system developed that balanced power between two kings, a council of elders and a politically active citizenry with some democratic powers. Five *ephors* were elected annually to oversee the system and could even check the power of the kings.

The Spartan war machine became the focus of society at the expense of all else. Wealth-seeking was discouraged and *Spartiates* were expected to devote their lives to military service. A strict education program from the age of seven taught boys to be soldiers and indoctrinated them to uphold the values of the state without question. From the age of twenty to sixty, Spartan men were expected to serve in the what became Greece's first standing army.

To enable the *Spartiates* to focus on warfare, the Spartans relied on the *helots* and *perioikoi*. The *helots* farmed the land on behalf of the *Spartiates* and supported them on military campaigns. The *helots* had little freedom and were treated brutally by the Spartans, leading to several revolts. The Spartans took a variety of measures to regularly remind the *helots* of their status in an effort to make them subservient. The *perioikoi* fulfilled important roles such as manufacturing, trade and agriculture. In contrast to the *helots*, they were free, though they did not have political rights.

Women and young girls in Sparta enjoyed relatively more freedom than in other Greek *poleis*, and were expected to be fit, healthy and educated. However, their primary role was always to produce healthy children for Sparta's army.

The end result of these reforms was that Sparta became one of the most powerful states in ancient Greece, with an effective army that was feared by other Greeks.

## CHAPTER REVIEW

Either in pairs or as a small group, give a five-minute presentation on one or more of the social groups listed below. Explain how they would have been affected by the social, economic and political reforms that were made to Sparta.

- The kings
- *Gerousia*
- *Ephors*
- Spartan citizens
- Spartan women
- *Perioikoi*
- *Helots*
- *Hypomeiones*
- *Mothones*
- *Neodamodeis*.

 SPARTA: KEY TERMS

 KEY EVENTS:  
EVALUATING SIGNIFICANCE

## EXAM PREPARATION

Explain the consequences of the following events:

- The wars against Messenia
- The *helot* revolts
- Land reforms
- The festival of the *Carneia*.

## ESSAY

Write an essay of 400–600 words on one of the following topics. Support your argument with evidence from primary sources and historical interpretations.

- In Sparta, women were more emancipated and empowered than anywhere else in Greece.
- Sparta boasted over 9000 free citizens, but in reality, nobody was truly free.
- It was the *perioikoi* who truly profited from the Spartan reforms.
- Spartan educational practices were brutal, yet ultimately effective.
- The social policies geared to develop and protect its citizens would lead to the downfall of Sparta itself.
- Despite what Spartans wanted to believe, democracy in Sparta did not exist.
- Create a historical question of your own about Sparta in the Classical Age.

## TEST

 QUIZ – CHAPTER 2

TEST YOUR  
LEARNING