

Athens and Sparta: Different yet the Same

The two rivals of ancient Greece that made the most noise and gave us the most traditions were Athens and Sparta. They were close together on a map, yet far apart in what they valued and how they lived their lives.

One of the main ways they were different was in their form of government. Athens had an Assembly, whose members were elected by the people. Sparta was ruled by two kings, who ruled until they died or were forced out of office. This type of government was called an oligarchy. Athens was ruled by archons, who were elected annually. Thus, because both parts of Athens' government had leaders who were elected, Athens is said to have been the birthplace of democracy.

Spartan life was simple. The focus was on obedience and war. Slavery made this possible by freeing the young men from household and industrial duties and allowing them to focus on their military duties. Young boys were trained to be warriors; young girls were trained to be mothers of warriors.

Athenian life was a creative wonderland. As an Athenian, you could get a good education and could pursue any of several kinds of arts or sciences. You could serve in the army or navy, but you didn't have to. (This applied only to boys, however: Girls were restricted to other pursuits, not war or business or education.)

For many years, Spartan armies provided much of the defense of the Greek lands. The Spartan heroism at the Battle of Thermopylae, during the Persian Wars, inspired all of Greece to fight back with all their might against the invading Persians. Athenian and Spartan fought side by side in the Battle of Plataea, which ended Persian invasions of Greece.

One way that Athens and Sparta really differed was in their idea of getting along with the rest of the Greeks. Sparta seemed content to keep to itself and provide army and assistance when necessary. Athens, on the other hand, wanted to control more and more of the land around them. This eventually led to war between all the Greeks. This was the Peloponnesian War. After many years of hard fighting, Sparta won the war. In true Greek spirit, Sparta refused to burn the city of Athens. Rather, the culture and spirit of Athens was allowed to live on, as long as the Athenians no longer desired to rule their fellow Greeks. In this way, the influence of Athens remained and grew stronger. Other city-states had the same kinds of temples, buildings, and meeting-places, but it was Athens that became most famous.

Text Evidence: How were Sparta and Athens different?