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Compare and contrast life in Athens and Sparta.

Focus Question: What were the similarities and differences between Athens and Sparta?



Athenian citizens, about 340 BCE

See [Two Faces of Greece: Athens and Sparta](#) retrieved February 10, 2007 from the pbs.org website. This is one of the most informative website to compare/contrast Ancient Sparta and Ancient Athens.



[The Polity of the Spartans](#), Xenophon, 375

BCE



[The Polity of the Athenians](#), "The Old Oligarch," 424 BCE



Bronze figure of a Spartan officer. 6th - 5th century B.C



[BBC Horrible Histories: Wife Swap: Spartans and Athenians](#): A witty, irreverent comparison of the Athenian and Spartan cultures. Good for a quick intro to the topic.



If you find this material particularly fascinating, the actual video from the PBS series is current available on YouTube (see links below).

[Part 1](#)

[Part 2](#)

[Part 3](#)

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The following is based upon the table presented on the PBS educational website, "The Greeks: Crucible of



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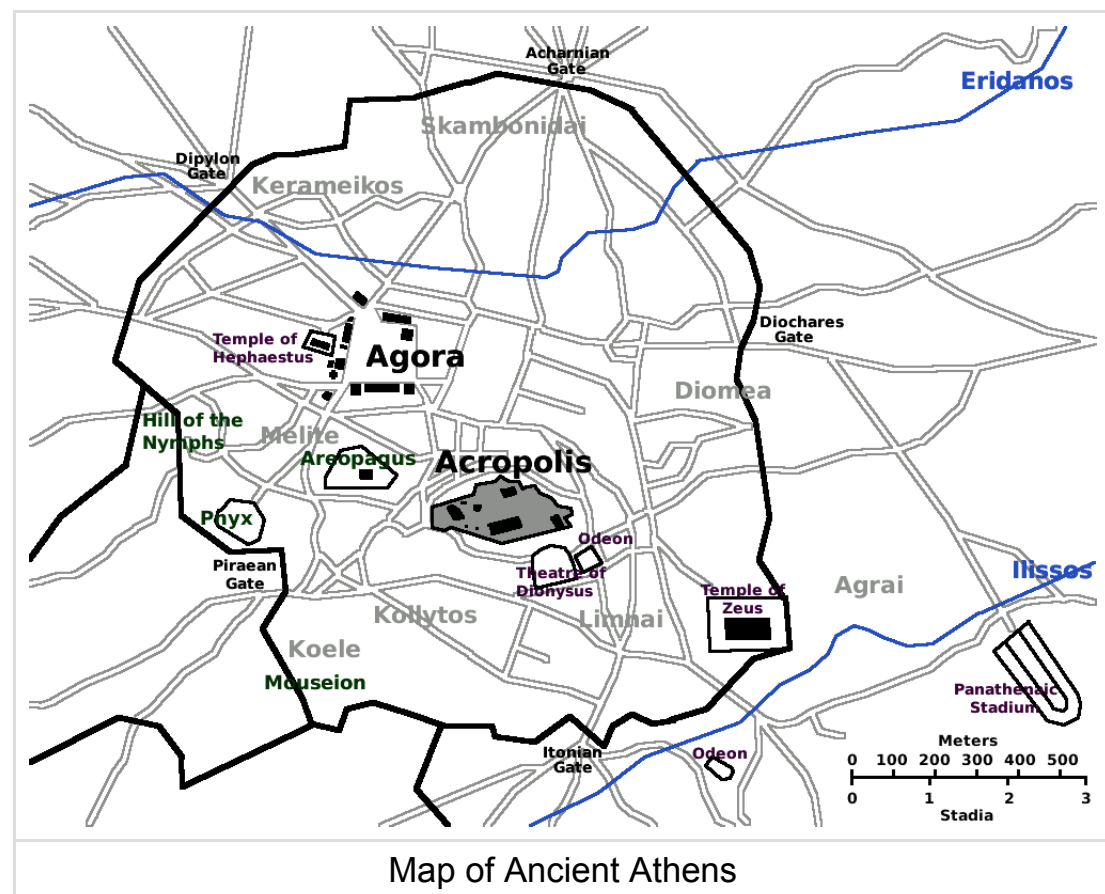
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website, [The Greeks: Crucible of Civilization](#). Points of similarity will be highlighted in **bold** front while points of difference will be *italicized*

Sparta and Athens: A Comparative Analysis



A picture of the Erechtheum a famous temple located on the northern acropolis of Athens, Greece. This represents one of the ancient architectural marvels of Ancient Athens



Population and Geography

Athens: Approximately 140,000.

They were influenced by the same geographical features—the water that surrounded them facilitated trade and travel.

In addition, their strategic location facilitated trade with other regional powers.

Sparta: Approximately 100,000.

While Sparta had a similar geographic location as Athens, Sparta did not use its location to facilitate trade and travel. While Sparta and Athens are not that far from each other, their landscapes differ greatly.

Instead, Sparta turned inward cutting itself away from the influences of other regional powers

- Besides the obvious differences in philosophies, there is a very big difference in geography that cause these differences. Ancient Athens was situated somewhat close to the coast; it was only about five miles to the port city of Piraeus (which became part of Athens with the building of the Long Walls), thus it was no more than a few hours of travel from Athens to the coast line, thus greatly increasing the ability to be a trade center. Ancient Sparta however is located at the shortest distance 40 miles from the coast, however the terrain is somewhat rocky and there is no real straight path to the coast line. This would have greatly impeded the ability for Sparta to become a major trading port

Government & Political Organizations

Athens Government

Typically classified as a "limited democracy." Also considered the "birthplace of democracy."

- Athens held the first democratic state, developed in 507 BC.
- Principally made up of elected officials:
 - Council of 500 made most of the main administrative decisions
 - The Assembly was open to all citizens. This body passed laws and made policy decisions.
- Although many nations throughout time have modeled their governments on the principles of Athenian Democracy, it was not perfect. Only men were able to participate in the democratic assemblies, and this was only 10-20% of the population. Women, children, slaves and foreigners were not allowed to participate.

Spartan Government

Typically classified as an "oligarchy" (rule by the few), but had elements of monarchy, democracy, and aristocracy

- Two kings were usually generals who commanded the major Spartan armies. While both were capable military leaders one was usually considered the leader of the army. This was done mainly so that in times of war Sparta would still retain a leader if the other were to die in battle. The most famous example was King Leonidas, who

- famously was able to hold off the enormous Persian Army at the battle of Thermopylae.
- Five overseers (ephors) ran the day-to-day operations of Sparta. These overseers held one year terms and were responsible for the education and conduct of all its citizens (The Essential World History, W. Duiker & J. Spielvogel, Second Edition, 2005, p. 76)
- Council or Senate (apella) of 28 councilmen. These men had to be over 60 years old and served lifetime terms. They acted as judges and proposed laws to the citizens' assembly.
- All Spartan males over age 30 could join the Assembly where they could show their support/dissent by shouting.

Social Structure

Athens Social Structure

- Freemen constituted all male citizens, divided into numerous classes:
 1. At the top, the aristocrats held large estates and made up the cavalry or captain triremes.
 2. Middle ranks consisted mostly of small farmers.
 3. The lowest class was the thetes who were usually urban craftsmen or rowers.
- Metics – the people who lived outside the walls of Athens
 - Unable to own land
 - Could run industries and businesses
- Slaves constituted the lowest class in Ancient Athens. Slaves had no rights. They constituted one fourth of the population. Though they often held important positions such as teachers and nurses.
- Women's principal role in Ancient Athens was in the home. They held no rights in the Athenian democracy.

Spartan Social Structure

Society was broken up into three main classes:

1. Spartiates – the military leadership who ruled the barracks. These men served in the military and could also vote.
2. Perioeci - the freemen in Ancient Sparta. These included: artisans, craftsmen, and merchants. While they did serve in the army, members of this group could not vote.
3. Helots – were serfs who generally descended from people overtaken by Spartan military victories. In addition to the conquest of land, these helots were the fruits of war. Members of this group typically gave half of their profits to the Spartan citizens who owned the land.



In comparison with Ancient Athens, Spartan women [held a variety of rights](#). For example, women could own property and engage in athletic events like the men in Ancient Sparta.

Lived by the motto of returning from battle either "With your shield or on it"

Language and Religion

Athens:

Same language, religion and gods as the Spartans. According to Duiker & J. Spielvogel, "religion was a civic duty necessary for the well-being of the state." (pg. 81)

- Polytheistic
- Zeus was the supreme leader

Sparta:

Same language, religion and gods as the Athenians. According to Duiker & J. Spielvogel, "religion was a civic duty necessary for the well-being of the state."(pg. 81)

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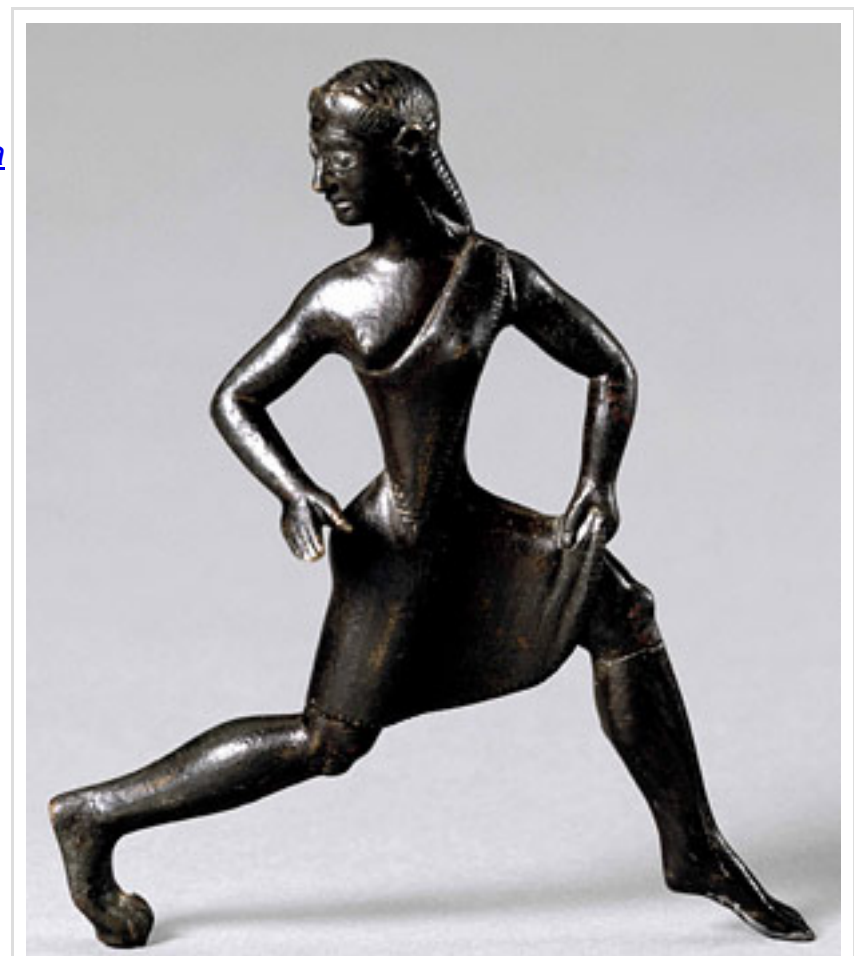
Military Strength and Cultural Values

Athens:

Strong navy and fortification

Strong belief in the democratic process

[Basic site for information on Ancient Greek Warfare](#)



Bronze statuette of running girl, probably from Sparta.

Sparta:

Strong army - overwhelmed opponents in sheer military strength

Strong belief in militaristic values. Their society was built upon a structure of order and discipline.

Education**Athens:**

Boys: Learned an array of subjects including reading, writing, mathematics, music, poetry, sports and gymnastics.

Girls: Females received scant formal education. Instead, these women would focus on domestic skills like weaving and spinning.

Sparta:

Boys: Formal educations in the schoolhouses were not prized in Ancient Sparta. At the age of 7, boys would be placed into state-run training centers. At 20, Spartan males entered military services where they needed to serve until age 60 (essentially their entire lives!). Spartan men could marry at the age of 20, however they were unable to live with their families until age 30 when they left active military service.

Girls: On the other hand, females did receive some lessons in reading and writing. In addition, they could participate in sports.



To "experience" a Spartan boy's education, check out this [interactive game](#).



[BBC Horrible Histories: Spartan Teacher Conference](#): Very funny.

Life and Arts**Athens:**

- *Much of what we have come to think of as the ingenuity and innovations of ancient Greece came from Athens. It was the largest and most culturally influential city-state, and the people were known for their love of learning and the arts, as well as great leaps forward in philosophy and science.*
- *Aside from being great writers and scholars, the Athenians were great architects. One of their most famous buildings, the Pantheon, is still an architectural marvel nearly 2500 years after its inception.*

Sparta:

- *Spartans did not place a high value on the arts, education or architecture.*
- *Spartans did not trade with others because they didn't want to be influenced by any outside cultures.*
- *According to Duiker & Spielvogel, Spartan citizens were discouraged to study the ideas of literature, science, and philosophy fearing that these new ideas could endanger the stability of the state (pg. 74)*

Cultural Achievements and Legacy**Athens:**

Left a large contribution to modern society. The arts, architecture, drama, literature, philosophy, science, medicine and government (democracy, trial by jury) are all ideas and disciplines that had great influence in Ancient Athens.

Sparta:

Military prowess.

This is best evidenced by the fact in the difference of the modern appearance of the two cities. Athens, which is also the capital of modern Greece, is a vibrant tourist community with great ties to its past. They still have numerous ancient buildings at least partially standing and have numerous museums dedicated to artifacts from the past. However when you go to Sparta, the only thing letting you know that it is actually the location of one of the greatest military powers of the ancient world, besides the signs obviously, is the giant statue of King Leonidas outside of a recreational facility.

Click [here](#) for an interactive comparison chart between Spartan and Athenian men and women.

<http://hyperhistory.net/apwh/essays/comp/cw04AthensSparta32120902.htm>

Additional Notes

Athens and Sparta sometimes had common enemies. In 490 BC, the Persians, led by King Darius, invaded Greece. Athens and Sparta joined with other city-states to fight the Persians. The Greeks won in a famous battle at Marathon, however this victory at Marathon was done without the aid of the Spartan army. In 481 BC, Persia attacked again, this time led by Xerxes, Darius' son. Athens and Sparta again united and eventually defeated the resurgent Persians.

Additional Resources

1. <http://oyc.yale.edu/classics/introduction-to-ancient-greek-history/>

On this website, students and teachers alike can watch college lectures of the Yale Classics course called, "Introduction to Ancient Greek History." Under the tutelage of Professor Donald Kagan, you can watch and listen to an entire semester's worth of classes on Ancient Greece including two on Athens and Sparta alike.

2. <http://www.hyperhistory.net/apwh/essays/comp/cw4athensspartap2dz.htm>

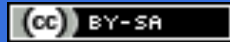
This website provides a short comparative essay between the city-states of Athens and Sparta.

3. http://www.studyworld.com/newsite/reportessay/History/European%5CSparta_Vs_Athens.htm Athens Info Guide, (2004). History of Athens, Birthplace of Democracy. Retrieved February 13, 2007, from Athens Info Guide Web site: <http://www.athensinfoguide.com/history.htm>

This is another short article comparing and contrasting Sparta and Athens.

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