
Education in Sparta: Did the Strengths Outweigh the Weaknesses?

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Overview: In the 5th century BCE, a Greek city-state called Sparta emerged as a tiny powerhouse in the eastern Mediterranean. Its greatest rival was nearby Athens, whose population was much larger and whose values were very different. Sparta's ability to compete with Athens, and the rest of the outside world, depended in large part on its education system and the values that were taught. This Mini-Q asks you to weigh the strengths and weaknesses of Spartan education.

The Documents:

Document A: The Agoge System ("a-go-gee")

Document B: Life in the Military

Document C: The Krypteia: Murder Squads ("crip-tee-a")

Document D: Moralia: Practices and Beliefs

Document E: Educating Girls

A Mini Document Based Question (Mini-Q)



Hook Exercise: What Do We Value?

Directions: Wagner Public School has a problem. This 6th–12th grade school is faced with budget cuts that will eliminate three programs currently in the curriculum. Your job is to analyze the list of course offerings and then make recommendations to the school board. There are two questions:

1. Which three programs should be cut and which will you keep?
2. Why?

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With a partner or in a small group, discuss the options and jot down the reasons for your three cuts.

Wagner Public School Curriculum			
	KEEP	CUT	REASONS FOR CUTS
After-School Sports	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Art/Theater/Music	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Community Service	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Computer Science	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
English	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Foreign Language	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
History / Government	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Math	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Physical Education	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Science	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Wood Shop / Home Economics	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

Education in Sparta: Did the Strengths Outweigh the Weaknesses?

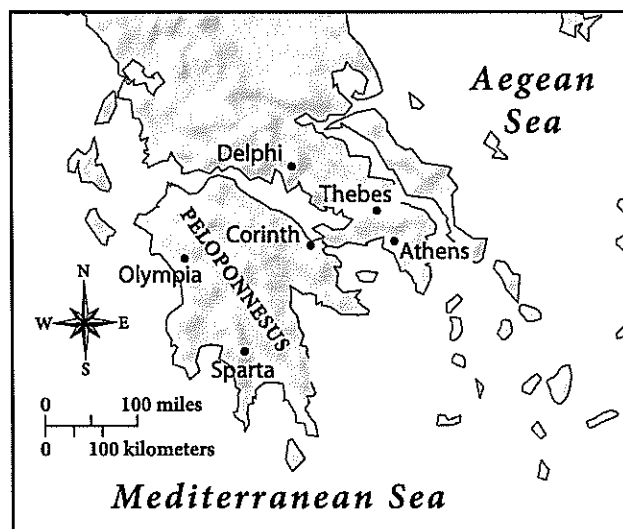
Sparta was never very big. Located on a peninsula in southern Greece called the **Peloponnese**, Sparta began as a cluster of houses huddled along the banks of the Evrotas River. Like many early Greek settlements, Sparta had to fight to survive. Slowly it grew enough to be called a city-state, and by 500 BCE was the dominant **city-state** on the Peloponnese. What was remarkable is that Sparta managed all this with a population of only 25,000 and an army of perhaps 8,000 men.

Just how did little Sparta become so strong? One important reason was military toughness, and more specifically, the perfection of a battle formation called the **phalanx**. The phalanx consisted of a tight group of soldiers each holding a shield that interlocked with his neighbor's, each man carrying a short sword and a thrusting spear. Intensive training was required for the phalanx to operate effectively. To move in unison – turning quickly to the right or to the left or reversing direction – required unwavering concentration and teamwork. With the phalanx, Spartan warriors were able to stand up to forces many times their size. The most stunning example was the 480 BCE battle of Thermopylae, in which several hundred Spartans stood shield-to-shield against tens of thousands of attacking Persians. Every Spartan died, but the Persian invasion never reached the Spartan homeland.

In the years that followed Thermopylae, Sparta's greatest challenger was Athens, the largest and most powerful of all the Greek city-states. For nearly 50 years, Sparta and Athens managed a shaky peace, but this ended in 431

BCE with the breakout of the 25-year-long Peloponnesian War. At the same time, Sparta was concerned about another problem, a potential enemy within. These were the **helots**. The helots, perhaps 100,000 in number, were the local people that Sparta had conquered on its way to ruling the Peloponnese. Helots were not quite slaves, but they weren't free, either. The helots lived outside the city limits and worked on farms owned and managed by the pure Spartans, called the **Spartiate**. The helots were required to give half of what they grew to their masters. The possibility of a rebellion was a constant Spartan worry.

During these years, Sparta was under terrific pressure, fighting Athens and at the same time looking over its shoulder at a restless helot population at home. In the end, Sparta did emerge the winner over Athens, but both city-states had suffered. The size of the Spartan army was sharply reduced, some estimates running as low as 1,000 men. Sparta's days as a military giant were over.



Win or lose, what was it that gave Sparta the courage and the confidence to believe it could hold on against such odds? One answer is the education and training of its young people, a system that historians believe had deep roots in Spartan history. But in the end, did that educational system serve the overall best interests of the Spartan people?

With this background in mind, we are ready to look at the documents and address the question asked by this Mini-Q: *Education in Sparta: Did the strengths outweigh the weaknesses?*

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Background Essay Questions

1. Where is Sparta located?
2. What military technique helped Sparta become so strong?
3. Who fought against whom in the Peloponnesian Wars?
4. What happened at Thermopylae?
5. Sparta faced threats from without and within the city-state. Who posed these threats?
6. What significant generalization can you make about the population make-up of Sparta?
7. Define these terms:

Peloponnesse

city-state

phalanx

helot

Spartiate

Timeline

900-800 BCE – Founding of Sparta

600s BCE – Introduction of the phalanx

480 BCE – Spartan “victory” over Persia at Thermopylae

431 BCE – Peloponnesian war against Athens begins.

404 BCE – Athens surrenders to Sparta.

300s BCE – A century of war

396 CE – Ancient city of Sparta destroyed by Visigoths.

1834 CE – Founding of the modern city of Sparta



Understanding the Question and Pre-Bucketing

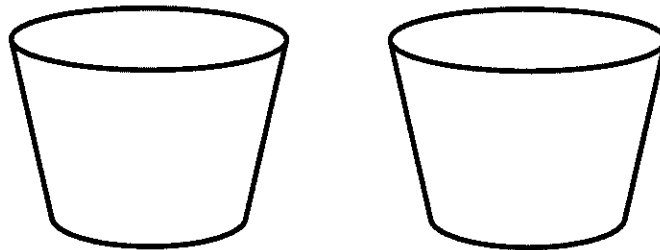
Understanding the Question

1. What is the analytical question asked by this Mini-Q?
2. What terms in the question need to be defined?
3. Rewrite the question in your own words.

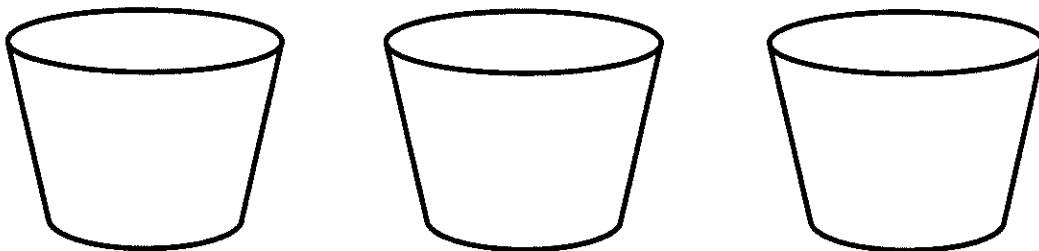
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Pre-Bucketing

Directions: We suggest a two-step bucketing process. First, create two starter buckets that identify the opposing positions on the question. Then, pick the position you feel contains the strongest evidence and create three “reason” buckets for that position.



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Document A

Source: J.T. Hooker, *The Ancient Spartans*, J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd. London, 1980.

A [Spartan] father had no right to decide whether to rear his newly born son or not. He was obliged to take the baby to the elders of his tribe for inspection. If they were satisfied that he was strong and healthy, they gave it back to the father to be brought up; if not, they ordered it to be exposed [left outside to die]. A Spartiate's son was nurtured by his parents only until he was seven years old. At that age he was removed from his family and, from his eighth to his twenty-first year, he was educated by the state according to a rigorous [military-like] discipline. This state-controlled education, or agoge, ["a-go-gee"] occupied a central place in the Spartan system....

An important magistrate [official], the Warden of the Boys, was appointed to take charge of the agoge. His authority over the boys resembled that of a general over an army. He was assisted in the enforcement of discipline by a number of citizens called Whip-bearers....

Immediately on his beginning the agoge, the seven-year old boy was enrolled in one of the 'troops' Each troop was captained by one of the boys, whose orders the rest had to obey. Only the rudiments [basics] of reading and writing were taught; instruction consisted for the most part in ... obedience, bodily fitness, and courage to conquer in battle. At the age of twelve a boy's regimen became even more severe.... Youths in the senior age-class of the agoge behaved like officers, organizing war-games for the boys and in the evening presiding in the mess [outside dining area]. Boys were encouraged to go out and steal food for the mess, but if caught stealing they were whipped. Athletic contests formed a large part of training in the agoge....

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Document Analysis

1. How many years did a Spartan boy spend in the agoge?
2. Is there evidence in this document to suggest that Spartan boys developed stronger attachments to their agoge troops than to their families? Explain.
3. What Spartan values are suggested by this document?
4. Judging from this document, what were the strengths of Spartan education?
5. Judging from this document, what were the weaknesses of Spartan education?

Document B

EV

Source: Xenophon, *Constitution of Sparta*, 5th century BCE.

Note: Xenophon [ZEN-o-foh] was a famous Athenian general. In this excerpt, he describes the military training he witnessed on a visit to Sparta. Xenophon credited Sparta's power to a prince named Lycurgus [LY-kurgus], who was regarded as the founder of formal Spartan education.

[Section 3] Instead of softening the boys' feet with sandals, [Lycurgus] required them to harden their feet by going without shoes. He believed that if this habit were cultivated it would enable them to climb hills more easily and descend steep inclines with less danger, and that a youth who had accustomed himself to go barefoot would leap and jump and run more nimbly than a boy in sandals.

[Section 4] And instead of letting them be pampered in the matter of clothing, he introduced the custom of wearing one garment throughout the year, believing that they would thus be better prepared to face changes of heat and cold.

[Section 5] As to the food, he required ... such a moderate amount of it that the boys ... would know what it was to go with their hunger unsatisfied; for he believed that those who underwent this training would be better able to continue working on an empty stomach, if necessary, and would be capable of carrying on longer without

extra food, if the word of command were given to do so....

[Sections 6,7] He also ... allowed them to alleviate their hunger by stealing something.... [Lycurgus] encouraged them to get their food by their own cunning.... Obviously a man who intends to take to thieving must spend sleepless nights and play the deceiver and lie in ambush by day, and moreover, if he means to make a capture, he must have spies ready. There can be no doubt then, that all this education was planned by him in order to make the boys more resourceful in getting supplies, and better fighting men.

[Section 8] Someone may ask: But why, if he believed stealing to be a fine thing, did he have the boy who was caught beaten with many stripes? I reply: Because in all cases men punish a learner for not carrying out properly whatever he is taught to do. So the Spartans chastise [punish] those who get caught for stealing badly.

Document Analysis

1. What clothing did Spartan boys wear?
2. What was the reason for small rations of food?
3. What was the reason for encouraging the boys to steal?
4. What was the reason for whipping boys who were caught stealing?
5. Judging from this document, what were the strengths of Spartan education?
6. Judging from this document, what were the weaknesses of Spartan education?

Document C

Source: Plutarch, *Lycurgus*, circa 75 CE.

Note: Plutarch [PLU-tark] was an acclaimed Greek historian who wrote *Parallel Lives*, a series of biographies of famous Greeks and Romans. In this excerpt from his biography of Lycurgus, Plutarch writes about the Spartan krypteia [crip-TEE-a], a kind of secret police or special-operations unit. It was manned by senior members of the agoge, who were 18 to 21 year old. The actions of the krypteia might have served as a training exercise and as a way to keep the helots in line.

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At intervals the magistrates [law-enforcement officers] would send out [the krypteia], the most sensible of the young Spartiates into various parts of the country. They carried daggers and as much food as was necessary, but nothing else. By day they scattered into obscure places, where they hid themselves and kept quiet; but at night they descended upon the highways and slaughtered any helots they caught. Often too they made their way across the fields and killed the strongest and best of the helots.... I believe that cruel acts of this sort were first practiced ... after the earthquake when the helots ... rebelled [in 464 BCE], devastated their territory, and threatened the city [Sparta] with considerable danger.

Document Analysis

1. What was the krypteia?
2. Who were the helots? (See Background Essay)
3. According to Plutarch, what was the Spartans' justification for killing helots?
4. Judging from this document, what were the strengths of Spartan education?
5. Judging from this document, what were the weaknesses of Spartan education?

Document D

Source: Plutarch, *Moralia: The Ancient Customs of the Spartans*, circa 100 CE.

Note: In ancient Greek, the word “moralia” means “values” or “virtues.”

[The Spartans] learned to read and write for purely practical reasons: but all other forms of education they banned from the country, books and treatises being included in this as much as [foreign teachers].

Moreover, the young men were required not only to respect their own fathers and to be obedient to them, but to have regard for all the older men, to make room for them on the streets, to give up their seats to them, and to keep quiet in their presence.

The boys of Sparta were lashed with whips during the entire day at the altar of Artemis Orthia, frequently to the point of death, and they bravely endured this, cheerful and proud, vying with one another ... as to which one of them could endure being beaten for the longer time and the greater number of blows. And the one who was victorious was held in special repute. This competition is called ‘The Flagellation,’ and it takes place each year.

It was not permitted them to take up any menial [low-level] trade at all; and there was no need whatever of making money.... The Helots tilled the soil for them.

It was not allowed them to go abroad, so they should have nothing to do with foreign ways and undisciplined modes of living.

They did not attend either comedy or tragedy, so that they might not hear anyone speak either in earnest or in jest against the laws.

They were ... seriously concerned over their music and their songs.... The rhythmic movement of their marching songs was such as to excite courage and boldness, and contempt for death; and these they used both in dancing, and also to the accompaniment of the flute when advancing upon the enemy.

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Document Analysis

1. According to Plutarch, what were Spartan children taught regarding:

- | | | |
|--|-----------------------------|--------------------|
| 1. the importance of reading | 3. working with one's hands | 6. attending plays |
| 2. treatment of any boy or man who is older than you | 4. the importance of money | 7. music |
| | 5. travel | |

2. Sparta was always very concerned about being attacked – both by outsiders and by the helots. How did the Spartan attitude toward the seven topics listed above address this concern about security?

3. Judging from this document, do you think the strengths of Spartan education were greater than the weaknesses? Explain.

Document E



Source: Xenophon, *Constitution of Sparta*, 5th century BCE.

[Lycurgus] believed motherhood to be the most important function of freeborn women. Therefore, in the first place, he insisted on physical training for the female no less than for the male sex: moreover, he instituted races and trials of strength for women competitors as for men, believing that if both parents are strong they produce more vigorous offspring.

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Source: *Plutarch Lycurgus*, circa 75 CE.

In order to [encourage] the good education of their youth, [Lycurgus] went so far back as to take into consideration their very conception at birth, by regulating their marriages.... He ordered the maidens to exercise themselves with wrestling, running, throwing the quoit*, and casting the dart, to the end that the fruit they conceived might, in strong and healthy bodies, take firmer root and find better growth... and might be the more able to undergo the pains of child-bearing.

*A quoit is an iron ring tossed like a horseshoe. A dart is a javelin.



A bronze statue from the 5th century BCE depicting a female Spartan dancer.

Document Analysis

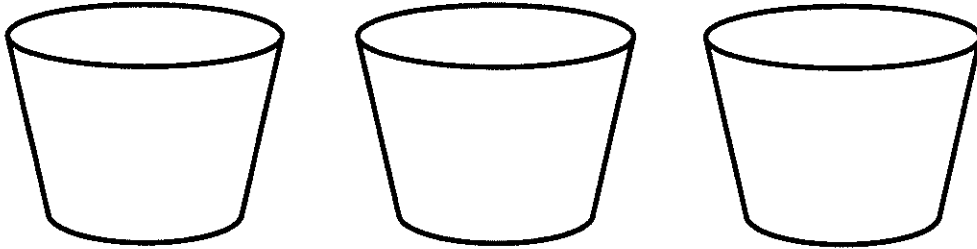
1. How would you describe the figure shown in the photograph?
2. According to both Xenophon and Plutarch, what was the purpose for training Spartan girls to wrestle, run, and throw?
3. Judging from this document, what were the strengths of Spartan education?
4. Judging from this document, what were the weaknesses of Spartan education?

Bucketing – Getting Ready to Write

Bucketing

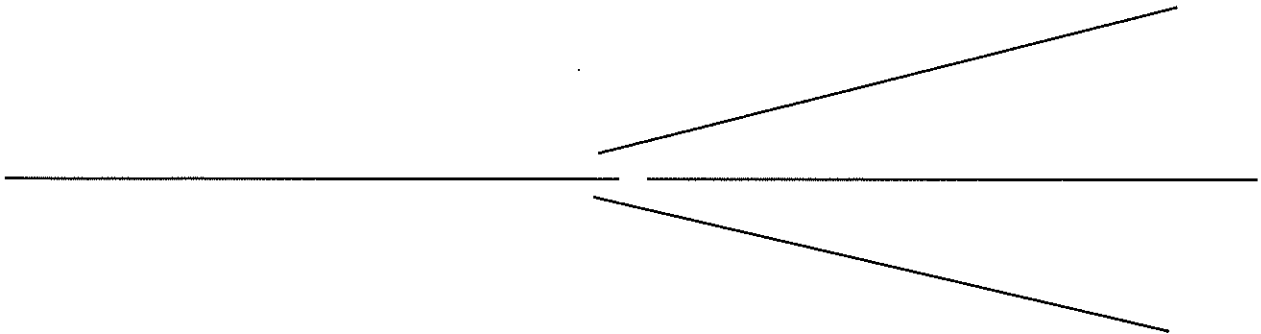
Look over all the documents and organize them into your final buckets. Write final bucket labels under each bucket and place the letters of the documents in the buckets where they belong. Remember, your buckets are going to be your body paragraphs.

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Thesis Development and Road Map

On the chickenfoot below, write your thesis and your road map. Your thesis is always an opinion and answers the Mini-Q question. The road map is created from your bucket labels and lists the topic areas you will examine in order to prove your thesis.





From Thesis to Essay Writing

Mini-Q Essay Outline Guide

Working Title

Paragraph #1

Grabber

Background

Stating the question with key terms defined

Thesis and road map

Paragraph #2

Baby Thesis for bucket one

Evidence: supporting detail from documents with document citation

Argument: connecting evidence to the thesis

Paragraph #3

Baby Thesis for bucket two

Evidence

Argument

Paragraph #4

Baby Thesis for bucket three

Evidence

Argument

Paragraph #5

Conclusion: "Although" statement followed by a restatement of main idea

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