

## Sparta

Ancient Greece was divided into independent city-states that ruled themselves. They might join together to fight off foreign invaders, but they also fought amongst themselves for power and land. One of the most feared of all was the state of Sparta. There is probably more mythology around the Spartans than any other Greek state, some of which is probably true and some of which is a bit more difficult to believe.

One thing that we do know for sure is that the Spartans were fiercely warlike. They were trained from a very young age to be fit and healthy. Boys were trained for war, but their girls were also taught how to be strong and fierce. They didn't often go off to battle, but they were needed to keep the city going when their husbands and sons did. Unlike most other states, Spartan women were given a good education and were free to do as they pleased around the city.

For boys, life was a lot tougher. They were sent to military school from the age of seven. At the Agoge, they were taught how to read and write, but also how to fight with many different weapons and in lots of different styles. The Spartan army was the strongest in Greece, and they kept it that way by treating their young boys as soldiers. The children weren't given much food to get them used to life in battle. They were often beaten and forced to fight each other to get stronger and to beat any emotions out of them.

War was the main focus of Spartan culture. They didn't study art or philosophy like the other states; they focused all of their attention on fighting. Their army was formidable and well-trained. They used various techniques to defeat their enemy, including something called the Phalanx. To do this, soldiers lined up next to each other and in rows. They used their shields (their most prized possession) to create an impenetrable wall around them all. They then used their spears to stab outwards. This was so effective that they regularly defeated much larger armies. Stories spread quickly, and many other armies were scared before they even fought the Spartans.

Spartan warriors carried a short sword, a spear and a shield with them. Their uniforms were made of red fabric. This is believed to have been to hide any blood if



they were wounded, making them seem invincible to their enemies. They were trained not to show any pain or fear, so they played up to this idea! It was a great dishonour to lose your shield in battle; this led to the famous Spartan saying: “Come back with your shield, or on it”. This refers to the tradition of carrying dead soldiers back home on their own shields. It was supposed to be what Spartan wives and mothers said to their men as they left.

The state of Sparta was formed somewhere around 650 BCE and fought many famous battles against Athens and the Persians. Sparta fought against Athens between 431 and 404 BCE before finally claiming victory. It was eventually defeated by the Roman Empire in 146 BCE.

## VOCABULARY FOCUS

1. What impression do you get of the Spartans from the phrase “fiercely warlike”?
2. Which word is closely linked to the army?

**Philosophy**

**Military**

**Culture**

3. Which word in the text describes the act of thinking about difficult problems and how to solve them?
4. Find and copy a word that describes something that nothing can get through.
5. What do you think the famous Spartan saying, given in the text, meant?

## VIPERS QUESTIONS

**S**

How were Spartan women treated differently to women in other city-states?

**R**

Who did the Spartans fight against for a long time?

**R**

How old were Spartan boys when they were sent away to school?

**I**

What evidence is there that Spartans considered it honourable to die in battle?

**R**

Which Empire eventually defeated Sparta?