

THE SPARTAN DISCIPLINE FOR YOUTHS

about A.D. 100

Plutarch

Before the seventh century B.C., the people of Sparta lived much like those in other Greek city-states. However, according to legend the Spartan government changed when it came under the leadership of the lawgiver Lycurgus. New laws were enacted that transformed Sparta into a military state. Sparta became a warrior culture that emphasized strength, discipline, and sacrifice. Several centuries later, the Greek writer Plutarch described the upbringing of Spartan youths in his biography of Lycurgus in *Parallel Lives*.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Forming and Supporting Opinions

Explain your opinion of the Spartan method of raising children.

Nor was it in the power of the father to dispose of the child as he thought fit; he was obliged to carry it before certain triers at a place called Lesche; these were some of the elders of a tribe to which the child belonged; their business it was carefully to view the infant, and, if they found it stout and well made, they gave order for its rearing, and allowed to it one of the nine thousand shares of land above mentioned for its maintenance, but if they found it puny and ill-shaped, ordered it to be taken to what was called the Apothetae, a sort of chasm under Taygetus¹; as thinking it neither for the good of the child itself, nor for the public interest, that it should be brought up, if it did not, from the very outset, appear made to be healthy and vigorous. There was much care and art, too, used by the nurses; they had no swaddling bands; the children grew up free and unconstrained in limb and form, and not dainty and fanciful about their food; not afraid in the dark, or of being left alone; without any peevishness or ill humor or crying. . . .

Lycurgus would not have pedagogues² bought out of the market for his young Spartans nor such as should sell their pains; nor was it lawful, indeed, for the father himself to breed up the children after his own fancy; but as soon as they were seven years old they were to be enrolled in certain companies and classes, where they all lived under the same order and discipline, doing their exercises and taking their play together. Of these, he who showed the most conduct and courage was made captain; they had their eyes always upon him, obeyed his orders, and underwent patiently whatsoever punishment he inflicted; so that the whole course of their education was one continued exercise of a ready and perfect obedience. The old men, too, were spectators of their performances, and often raised quarrels and disputes among

1. **Taygetus:** mountains near Sparta

2. **pedagogues:** teachers

them, to have a good opportunity of finding out their different characters, and of seeing which would be valiant, which a coward, when they should come to more dangerous encounters. Reading and writing they gave them, just enough to serve their turn; their chief care was to make them good subjects, and to teach them to endure pain and conquer in battle. To this end, as they grew in years, their discipline was proportionably increased; their heads were close clipped, and they were accustomed to go barefoot, and for the most part to play naked.

The Second Stage of the Spartan Education

After they were twelve years old, they were no longer allowed to wear any undergarment; they had one coat to serve them a year; their bodies were hard and dry, with but little acquaintance of baths and unguents; these human indulgences they were allowed only on some few particular days in the year. They lodged together in little bands upon beds made of the rushes which grew by the banks of the river Eurotas, which they were to break off with their hands without a knife; if it were winter, they mingled some thistledown with their rushes, which it was thought had the property of giving warmth. . . . The old men, too, had an eye upon them, coming often to the grounds to hear and see them contend either in wit or strength with one another, and this as seriously and with as much concern as if they were their fathers, their tutors, or their magistrates; so that there scarcely was any time or place without some one present to put them in mind of their duty, and punish them if they had neglected it.

The Organization into Brotherhoods

Besides all this, there was always one of the best and honestest men in the city appointed to undertake the charge and governance of them; he again arranged them into their several bands, and set over each of them for their captain the most temperate and boldest of those they called Irens, who were usually twenty years old, two years out of the boys; and the eldest of the boys, again, were Mell-Irens, as much as to say, who would shortly be men. This young man, therefore, was their captain when they fought, and their master at home, using them for the offices of his house; sending the oldest of them to fetch wood, and the weaker and less able, to gather salads and herbs, and these they must either go without or steal; which they did by creeping into the gardens, or conveying themselves cunningly and closely into the eating houses: if they were taken in the act, they were whipped without mercy, for thieving so ill and awkwardly. . . . So seriously did the Lacedaemonian children go about their stealing, that a youth, having stolen a young fox and hid it under his coat, suffered it to tear out his very bowels with its teeth and claws, and died upon the place, rather than let it be seen. What is practiced to this very day in Lacedaemon is enough to gain credit to this story, for I myself have seen several of the youths endure whipping to death at the foot of the altar of Artemis, surnamed Orthia.

They taught them, also, to speak with a natural and graceful raillery, and to comprehend much matter of thought in few words. For Lycurgus, who ordered, as we saw, that a great piece of money should be but of an inconsiderable value, on the contrary would allow no discourse to be current which did not contain in a few words a great deal of useful and curious sense; children in Sparta, by a habit of long silence, came to give just and sententious answers; for, indeed, as loose and incontinent livers are seldom fathers of many children, so loose and incontinent talkers seldom originate many sensible words. King Agis,³ when some Athenian laughed at their short swords, and said that the jugglers on the stage swallowed them with ease, answered him, “We find them long enough to reach our enemies with”; and as their swords were short and sharp, so, it seems to me, were their sayings. They reach the point and arrest the attention of the hearers better than any other kind.

Source: Excerpt from “Life of Lycurgus” by Plutarch, in *Plutarch: The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, translated by John Dryden and revised by Arthur Hugh Clough (New York: The Modern Library, 1932).

3. **King Agis:** leader of one of the Spartan armies