

Athens and Sparta

The competing Greek city-states of Athens and Sparta had very opposing cultures and governments, but both managed to grasp power over Greece. Athens, with its free speaking democracy, allied with many smaller city-states to form a powerful rule. Sparta, with its strong military, conquered many lands and forced them into submission. Athens and Sparta flourished during their time as powerful governments, but both eventually fell.

Greece was composed of hundreds of small city-states who governed themselves. Athens was the most populated. At first, it was ruled by tyrants. Then, in 507 BC, the city formed a democracy. Every month a new set of 500 citizens were chosen to form a council to decide political matters.

At about 471 BC, Athens began its Golden Age, which would last for several decades under the leadership of Pericles. The Athenians formed an alliance of many Greek city-states, known as the Delian League. Athens, being the largest city and having the most powerful navy, received tribute from the smaller cities.

During this time, Athens was expanding with new buildings such as the Parthenon, a gigantic temple honoring the goddess Athena. Philosophers, such as Socrates and later Aristotle, kindled the growth of wisdom. Athenians were entertained through plays like those of Aristophanes, who made fun of political people.

Sparta, in sharp contrast to Athens, cared nothing for growth of buildings or wisdom, but only for expansion of power. Sparta was founded as the Dorian capitol of Laconia in 1150 BC. The Dorians were fierce people that had invaded Greece about 1250 BC.

Sparta's government was an oligarchy. It was ruled by two kings, an assembly of elders, and an assembly of citizens over age 30. There was no freedom. Everybody served the state. Money was not used, for they didn't want any one person to be richer than another. Also, Spartan government would not allow trade with other countries for they didn't want the people to be exposed to foreign ideas.

At about 700 BC, the Spartans decided to expand, so they attacked their neighboring inhabitants. After a hard war that lasted many years, the Spartans victoriously enslaved them. The Spartans' slaves, called Helots, were made to do all the agricultural work in Sparta. The Helots outnumbered the Spartans though, and they revolted several times. In order to control the Helots, the Spartans reshaped their whole culture by building a strong military.

All citizens focused on the military. Newborns, that weren't physically perfect, were left to die. Boys were taken away from their mothers at age 7 to begin their training as soldiers. Even the young girls were forced to undergo rigorous physical training so that they would grow up to be tough. Men lived in barracks, training constantly for battle. As a result of their unparalleled military training, Sparta became the most powerful city-state.

In 490 BC, the Persian Empire, ruled by king Darius, invaded Greece. Athens, Sparta, and other city-states joined forces to meet them at Marathon. However, the Spartans were late in arriving because they were in the middle of a festival honoring the gods. So, the Athenians had to face the mighty Persian army alone. Although outnumbered considerably, they fought valiantly and defeated the Persians.

Nine years later, the Persians returned under the rule of Xerxes, Darius's son. This time, they would not be beaten so easily. The Athenians and Spartans fought side by side, in an all out attempt to halt the invaders. After several defeats, the united Greeks finally smashed both the Persian army and navy in one quick blow.

The friendship between the Athenians and Spartans did not last long. Sparta became alarmed at how much the Athenian military was growing. They could not allow any other city-state to become more powerful than themselves, so they sought a way to cripple Athens. They attacked Athens and its allied city-states. Other city-states allied with Sparta hoping to be free from Athenian rule. The Spartans lost many men, so fearing a Helot revolt, they agreed to a peace treaty. Only a few years went by before Athens provoked a fight by attacking Sparta's allies. This also ended in a peace agreement.

In 415 BC, the Athenians, now under the influence of Alcibiades, who succeeded Pericles, decide to grasp power by attacking the powerful city-state of Syracuse, in Sicily. Just before the invasion took place, Alcibiades was accused of desecrating statues of the god Hermes. Rather than face a trial, he ran away and betrayed to the Spartan side.

The Athenian invasion of Sicily was disastrous. Devastated, the Athenian military came home only to be met by oncoming Spartan troops, who were advised by Alcibiades that the time to attack its rival was at hand. The ensuing war, known as the Peloponnesian War, lasted for 28 years. In the end, Sparta and its well-trained fighting force were victorious. Athens and its allies were defeated and at Sparta's mercy.

Instead of burning Athens to the ground however, the Spartans merely put it under their rule, establishing an oligarchy. Sparta, believing itself to now be the ultimate power in Greece, forced all the city-states into Spartan rule. Cities that had once been a democracy could not endure the oppression of an oligarchy. Athens began to revolt, and was followed by almost all of Greek's city-states, including those that had once been in alliance with Sparta.

The outnumbered Spartans soon found themselves fighting all of Greece. They did not have the manpower to contain all the revolts. Sparta was soon robbed of its power and reduced to a dwindled race. Neither Athens nor Sparta were ever able to regain their past glory. History, however, remembers Athens for its undying wisdom, and Sparta for its unmatched military. Ironically, during their quest for power over Greece, the two city-states caused each other's demise.