Ancient Greece: The rise of city-states
Athens and Sparta

The Panachaiko Mountains of Greece. The high mountains of Greece made it difficult for individual city-states to connect and communicate. As a result, two city-states in ancient Greece could be quite different from each another. Photo from: Wikimedia Commons.

Geography plays a critical role in shaping civilizations. This is particularly true of ancient Greece.

The Greek peninsula has two distinctive geographic features that influenced the development of Greek society. First, Greece has easy access to water. The land contains countless scattered islands, deep harbors and a network of small rivers. This easy access to water meant that the Greek people might naturally become explorers and traders.

Second, Greece's mountainous terrain led to the development of the polis (city-state), beginning about 750 B.C.E. The high mountains made it very difficult for people to travel or communicate. Therefore, each polis developed independently and, often, very differently from one another. Eventually, the polis became the structure by which people organized themselves. Athens and Sparta are two good examples of city-states that contrasted greatly with each other.
Athens: The Think-Tank

The city-state of Athens was the birthplace of many significant ideas. Ancient Athenians were a thoughtful people. They enjoyed the systematic study of subjects such as science, philosophy and history, to name a few.

Athenians placed a heavy emphasis on the arts, architecture and literature. The Athenians built thousands of temples and statues that embodied their understanding of beauty. Today the term "classical" is used to describe their enduring style of art and architecture. Athenians also enjoyed a democratic form of government in which some of the people shared power.

Sparta: Military Might

Life in Sparta was vastly different from life in Athens. Located in the southern part of Greece on the Peloponnisos peninsula, the city-state of Sparta developed a militaristic society. Sparta was ruled by two kings and an oligarchy, or small group that exercised political control.
Early in their history, a violent and bloody slave revolt caused the Spartans to change their society. A Spartan named Lycurgus drafted a harsh set of laws that required total dedication to the state from its people. The laws' goal was to train citizens to become hardened soldiers
so that they could fight off potential enemies or slave revolts. The result was a rigid lifestyle unlike any seen in Greece at the time. The devotion of Spartans to developing a military state left little time for the arts or literature.

A Spartan baby had to be hardy and healthy. To test a baby’s strength, parents would leave their child on a mountain overnight to see if it could survive on its own until the next morning. By age 7, Spartan boys were taken from their families and underwent severe military training. They wore uniforms at all times, ate small meals of bland foods, exercised barefoot to toughen their feet and were punished severely for disobedient behavior. Boys lived away from their families in barracks until the age of 30, even after they were married. Men were expected to be ready to serve in the army until they were 60 years old.

Women, too, were expected to be loyal and dedicated to the state. Like men, women followed a strict exercise program and contributed actively to Spartan society. Although they were not allowed to vote, Spartan women typically had more rights and independence than women in other Greek city-states.

Winning By Losing

The differences between Athens and Sparta eventually led to war between the two city-states. It was known as the Peloponnesian War, and it lasted from 431-404 B.C.E. Both Sparta and Athens gathered allies and fought on and off for decades because no single city-state was strong enough to conquer the others.

With war came famine, plague, death and misfortune. But war cannot kill ideas. Despite the eventual military surrender of Athens, Athenian thought spread throughout the region. After temporary setbacks, these notions only became more widely accepted and developed with the passing centuries.
Quiz

1  Read the summary of the article. Choose the answer that BEST goes into the blank to complete the summary.

The mountainous terrain of Ancient Greece led to the creation of city-states, cities with their own governments. Athens and Sparta were two famous city-states.

_______________________________.

Eventually, these differences led to a 30-year war between the two city-states. Athens surrendered, but its important ideas remained.

(A) Lycurgus was the most famous ruler of the Athenian city-state and developed the idea for democracy.

(B) Spartans cared more about the development of healthy, strong children than the Athenians did.

(C) Athenian women had more rights in their government than Spartan women did.

(D) The people of Athens pursued knowledge, artwork and beauty, while the Spartans trained every citizen in preparation for war.

2  Finish the sentence.

The author explains the importance of warfare to Spartans MAINLY by _____________________.

(A) detailing their battle plans during the Peleponnesian War

(B) describing how every area of life was driven by training for battle

(C) highlighting the role that women played in war

(D) comparing the Athenian military to the Spartan military

3  Read the section "Sparta: Military Might." Select the paragraph that MOST suggests the motivation for Sparta's emphasis on war preparation.

4  Which selection from the article BEST supports the idea that Athenian society had long-lasting impact?

(A) Ancient Athenians were a thoughtful people.

(B) Athenians placed a heavy emphasis on the arts, architecture and literature.

(C) With war came famine, plague, death and misfortune. But war cannot kill ideas.

(D) After temporary setbacks, these notions only became more widely accepted and developed with the passing centuries.