

Chapter 8: The Greek Adventure: 8-4c Spartan Militarism

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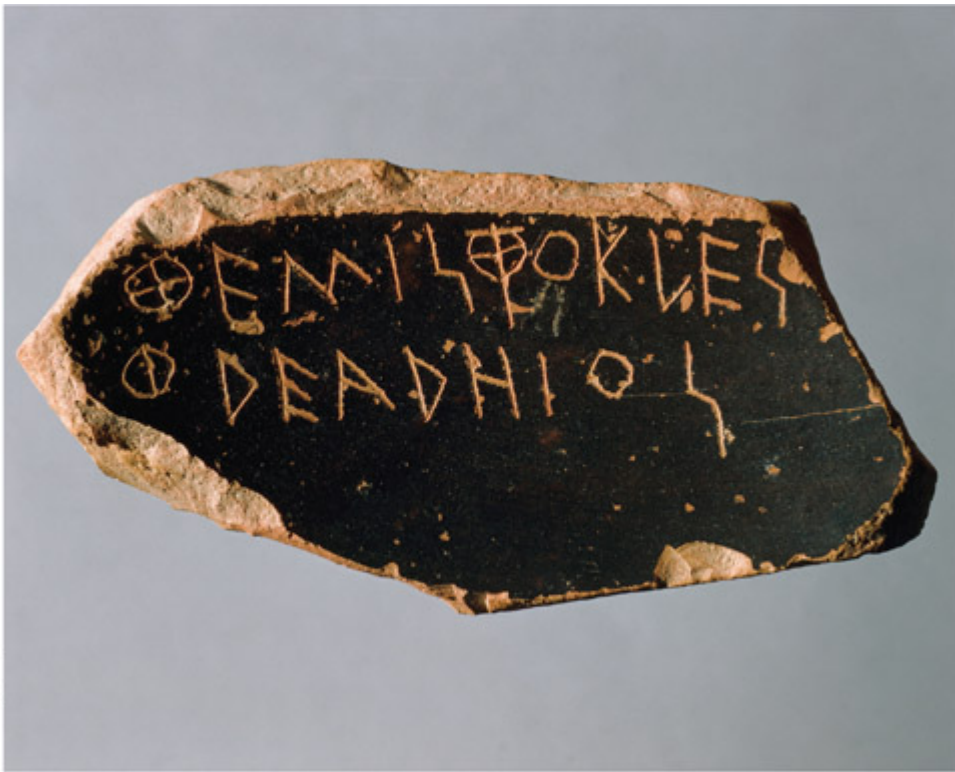
8-4c Spartan Militarism

By about 500 B.C.E., Sparta differed from Athens in almost every possible way, although the two were originally similar. The Spartan polis, located in the southern Peloponnesus about eighty miles from Athens, was a small city surrounded by pastoral villages. As the population grew in the 700s, the Spartans engaged in a bloody territorial war, the [Messenian \(mehs-seh-NEE-an\) Wars \(Conflicts between the neighbors Sparta and Messenia that resulted in Messenia's conquest by Sparta in about 600 B.C.E.\)](#), with their nearest Greek neighbor, Messenia, and finally won. The defeated people were reduced to a state of near slavery (*helotry*) to the Spartans, who from this point on became culturally different from most other Greeks. The most striking example of their divergence was their voluntary abdication of individual freedoms. During the 600s the Messenians rebelled again and again, and as a result the Spartans made themselves into a nation of soldiers and helpers of soldiers so that they could maintain their endangered privileges.

Ostraka Shard.

Each year, the citizenry of Athens was allowed to vote to ostracize any of their colleagues. The ballot, or *ostraka*, was a ceramic token inscribed in advance with a name or a piece of broken pottery, like the one shown here. If someone received a predetermined number of votes, that person was expelled from the polis. How did this relate to the creation of a political democracy?

Gianni Dagli Orti/Corbis



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The captive helots largely met Sparta's economic needs. They worked the fields and conducted the necessary crafts and commerce under close supervision. The Spartans themselves devoted their energies to the military arts. Male children entered a barracks at the age of seven and thereafter were allowed free time only sufficient to ensure that another generation of Spartan warriors would be born of Spartan mothers.

Unlike other Greeks, the Spartans held the arts in contempt and rejected individualism as being unworthy of them. Public life was expressed in total obedience to the state, which was headed by a group of elected officers called *ephors* (EE-fors), under the symbolic leadership of a dual monarchy. This strange combination seems to have worked satisfactorily into the 300s.

What did the other Greeks think of Sparta? One might think that they would detest such a regime, but, on the contrary, most Greeks admired the Spartan way of life, especially its undoubted self-discipline, courage, rigid obedience, and physical vigor. Even many Athenians thought the Spartan way was superior to their own and envied the single-minded patriotism displayed by the Spartans in all their public affairs.

Despite its military nature, Sparta was a conservative and nonaggressive state. The Spartan army was so large and so feared that after about 600, Sparta rarely had to use it in war. Sparta actually became a peaceable polis and directed all of its attention to keeping the political status quo within its own borders and, so far as possible, outside them.

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