Daily Life in Ancient Sparta

Both daily life and education were very different in Sparta than it was in the other city-states. With the exception of the Athenians (who thought Athens was the best!), Greeks from other city-states had a grudging admiration for the Spartans. They wouldn't want to be Spartans, but in times of war, they most certainly wanted Sparta to be on their side. The Spartans were tough, and the ancient Greeks admired strength.

**Education:**

**ATHENS:** In ancient Athens, the purpose of education was to produce citizens trained in the arts, to prepare citizens for both peace and war. Girls were not educated at school, but many learned to read and write at home, in the comfort of their courtyard. Until age 6 or 7, boys were taught at home by their mother or by a male slave. From age 6 to 14, they went to a neighborhood primary school or to a private school. Books were very expensive and rare, so subjects were read out-loud, and the boys had to memorize everything. In primary school, they learned two important things—the words of Homer, a famous Greek epic poet, and how to play the lyre, a musical instrument. Their teacher, who was always a man, could choose what additional subjects he wanted to teach. He might choose to teach drama, public speaking, government, art, reading, writing, math, and another favorite ancient Greek instrument—the flute. Following that, boys attended a higher school for four more years. When they turned 18, they entered military school for two years. At age 20, they graduated.

**SPARTA:** In ancient Sparta, the purpose of education was to produce a well-drilled, well-disciplined marching army. Spartans believed in a life of discipline, self-denial, and simplicity. They were very loyal to the state of Sparta. Every Spartan, male or female, was required to have a perfect body. When babies were born in ancient Sparta, Spartan soldiers would come by the house and check the baby. If the baby did not appear healthy and strong, the infant was taken away, and left to die on a hillside or trained as a slave (a *helot*). A baby who passed this examination was assigned membership in a brotherhood or sisterhood, usually the same one to which his father or her mother belonged.

**Spartan Boys:** Spartan boys were sent to military school at age 6 or 7. They lived, trained and slept in the barracks of their brotherhood. At school, they were taught survival skills and other skills necessary to be a great soldier. School courses were very hard and often painful. Although students were taught to read and write, those skills were not very important to the ancient Spartans. Only warfare mattered. The boys were not fed well, and were told that it was fine to steal food as long as they did not get caught stealing. If they were caught, they were beaten. The boys marched without shoes to make them strong. It was a brutal training period.
Poetry: Like all Greeks, the ancient Spartans loved stories about their gods, their heroes, and their history. They also loved poetry. The Spartans, not the Athenians, wrote the first love poems in Greece. They were fierce warriors, but quite romantic in their way.

Greek Weddings:
In ancient Athens, wedding ceremonies started after dark. The veiled bride traveled from her home to the home of the groom while standing in a chariot. Her family followed the chariot on foot, carrying the gifts. Friends of the bride and groom lit the way, carrying torches and playing music to scare away evil spirits. During the wedding ceremony, the bride would eat an apple, or another piece of fruit, to show that food and other basic needs would now come from her husband. Gifts to the new couple might include baskets, furniture, jewelry, mirrors, perfume, and vases filled with greenery.

In ancient Sparta, the ceremony was very simple. After a tussle, to prove his superior strength, the groom would toss his bride over his shoulder and carry her off. Spartan men only married women who wanted to marry them. There were no forced marriages in Sparta, and no marriages created for social gain. Spartan men married for love. They chose a bride the same way they chose everything—as a teammate for life.

Spartans believed in teamwork. You fought in teams, with a brother warrior, so you always had someone to watch your back. To the Spartans, teaming up with another city-state was logical. Sparta teamed with different city-states at different times for different reasons. For all their warlike behavior and training, when a problem arose with another city-state, Sparta would first try to solve that problem through discussion and negotiation. If that failed, they would fight. Since they were legendary warriors, in most cases, the other Greek city-states worked out their differences with Sparta without going to war.

ASK A SPARTAN:
How do Spartans feel about their city-state in comparison to other city-states in ancient Greece? A Spartan warrior might answer something like this:

“You want me to compare Sparta with Athens?” The Spartan warrior laughed uproariously. He waved a few of his fellow warriors over to share the joke. “We would rather die than behave like those silly citizens of Athens.” (Nods all around.) “We know we are superior and we are delighted to be Spartan! Lie, cheat, and steal, but do not get caught—that is the Spartan way.” (All the warriors nodded. These were wise words indeed.) “We endure unbelievable pain and hardship to become a superior Spartan soldier and citizen! Taken away from our parents at age 7, we live a harsh and often brutal life in the soldiers’ barracks. Older children, who start fights to help us tough and strong, beat us. We are often whipped in front of groups of other Spartans, including our parents, but we never cry out in pain. We are given very little food. We are encouraged to steal food, instead. If caught stealing, we are beaten. To avoid severe pain, we learn to be cunning, to lie, to cheat, to steal, and how to get away with it! We are fierce, capable, and proud of our strength. Compare Sparta to Athens? Don’t make me laugh!” Laughing heartily, shoulder to shoulder, the warriors marched away. (I fled.)