

ANCIENT AND MEDIEVAL PEOPLE

The Spartan Hoplites

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Glossary words

When a word is written
in **bold**, click on it to find
its meaning.

Who were the Spartan hoplites?

The Spartan hoplites were trained soldiers who served in the Spartan army. They were skilled fighters who **conquered** many areas around Sparta.

Ancient Sparta

Ancient Sparta was a Greek **city-state** located near Athens. It was known for its powerful army. Sparta was formed around 950 BCE, when four local tribes banded together to conquer the land of Laconia. The city-state of Sparta was built on the banks of the Eurotas River, in the valley beneath Mount Taygetos.



The ancient city-state of Sparta was located near Athens, in Greece.

The development of the Spartan army

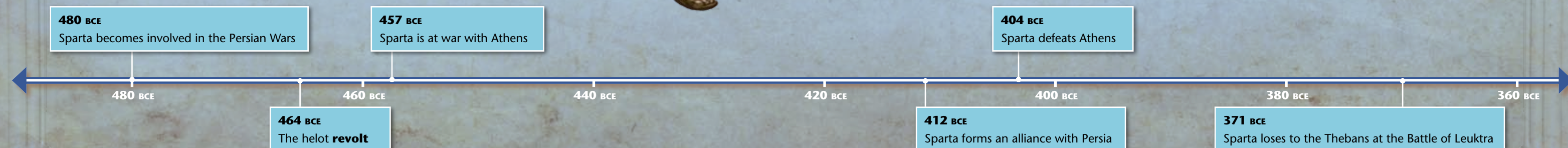
The Spartan army developed as Sparta grew in strength and size. When Sparta was first established, the conquered Laconian people became either helots or periokoi. Helots were slaves, while periokoi were merchants and traders. Male members of the tribes that conquered Laconia became Spartiate **citizens**. As Sparta grew, these Spartiate citizens formed a government and the Spartan army. For hundreds of years, all Spartiate citizens fought in the Spartan army.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Hoplite

The word *hoplite* comes from the Greek word *hoplon*. A hoplon was the type of shield carried by soldiers. The word *periokoi* is also Greek and means 'dwellers around'.

Ancient Sparta timeline



Spartan society

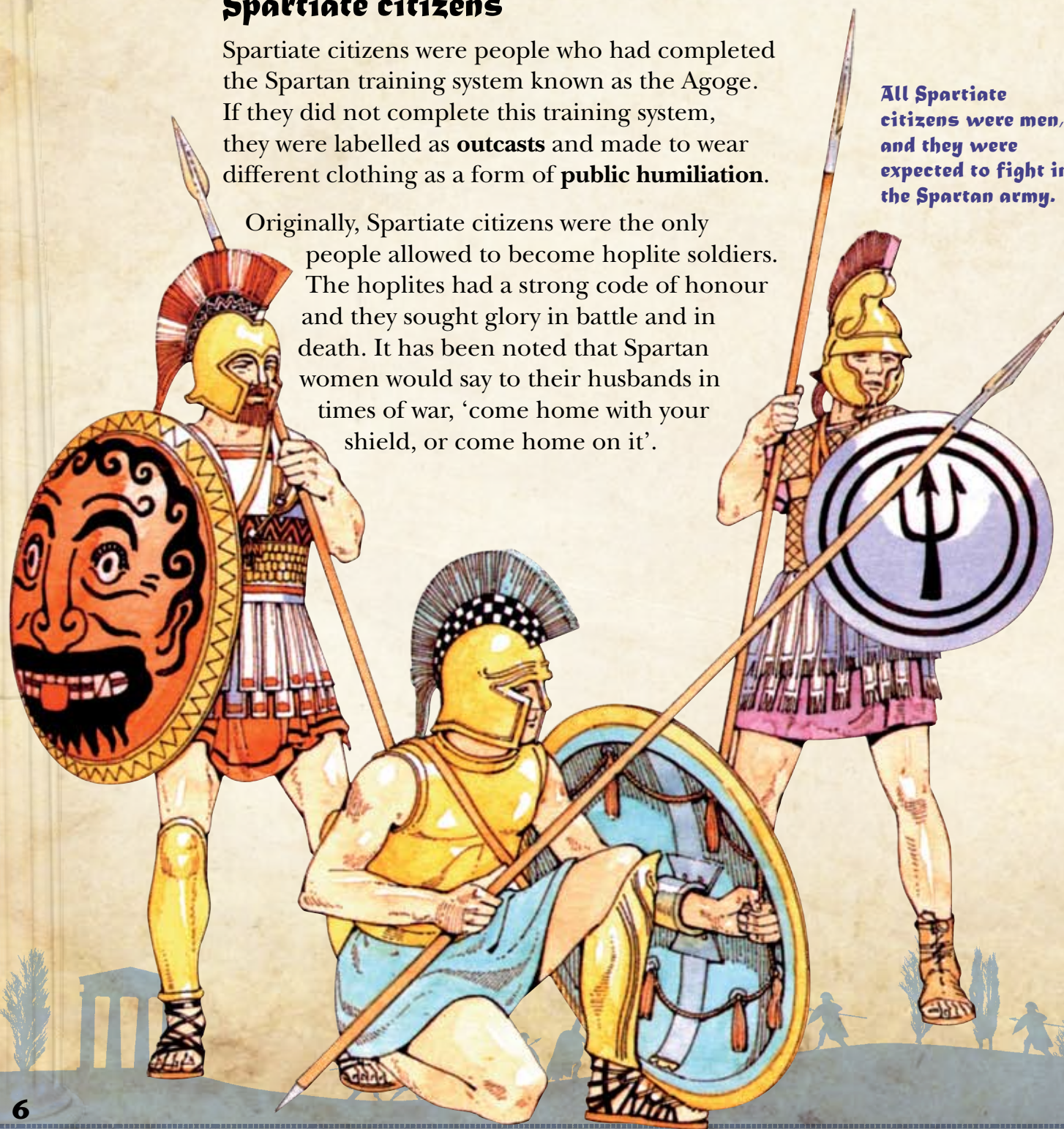
Spartan society was made up of several **social classes**, including the Spartiate citizens, the perioikoi and the helots. The perioikoi and the helots were dominated by the Spartiate citizens.

Spartiate citizens

Spartiate citizens were people who had completed the Spartan training system known as the Agoge. If they did not complete this training system, they were labelled as **outcasts** and made to wear different clothing as a form of **public humiliation**.

Originally, Spartiate citizens were the only people allowed to become hoplite soldiers. The hoplites had a strong code of honour and they sought glory in battle and in death. It has been noted that Spartan women would say to their husbands in times of war, 'come home with your shield, or come home on it'.

All Spartiate citizens were men, and they were expected to fight in the Spartan army.



The perioikoi

The perioikoi were the free people of the lands of Messenia and Lakonia. They were the traders, merchants and fishers of Sparta. Some historians have noted that they also made shoes, garments and tools. The perioikoi sometimes had the right to a trial if accused of committing a crime, although the Spartan government could sentence them to death without trial, too.

Quick facts

What were the benefits of being a Spartiate citizen?

People who became Spartiate citizens did not have to work and were given land.

- ❖ Spartiate citizens were wealthy. Their wealth came from land and property worked on by helots.
- ❖ Spartiate citizens were banned from trade or manufacturing work. This work was done by the perioikoi.
- ❖ At the beginning of the 500s BCE it is thought that there were around 10 000 Spartiate citizens. By 244 BCE there were fewer than 700 citizens left.

Members of the perioikoi made weapons and armour for the Spartan hoplites.



The helots

The helots were slaves and peasants from the conquered lands of Messenia and Lakonia. They were owned by the city-state of Sparta, and they worked the land owned by Spartiate citizens. Helots were required to hand over half of their produce to their master. They had no legal or political rights.

Spartiate citizens believed they were **superior** to the helots and treated them cruelly. In 464 BCE, the helots revolted against the Spartiate citizens on Mount Ithome. The revolt was so powerful that the Spartans had to seek help from other Greek city-states in order to crush it.

Helots were slaves and workers in Ancient Sparta.

*'They assign to the helots every shameful task leading to disgrace. For they **ordained** that each one of them must wear a dogskin cap and wrap himself in sins and receive a **stipulated** number of beatings every year regardless of any wrongdoing, so that they would never forget that they were slaves.'*

THE HISTORIAN MYRON



The krypteia

The krypteia were thought to be Sparta's secret police, and they controlled the helots. Members of the krypteia targeted helots who stood out for their fitness and strength, were leaders among other helots or were outspoken about the Spartan government's policies. The krypteia captured and murdered these helots at night.

Many historians believe that serving in the krypteia was a rite of passage for Spartiate citizens, in order to complete the Agoge training. This would have taught the soldiers **stealth** and given them experience in hand-to-hand combat.

Krypteia would spy on helot homes at night, looking for signs of suspicious activities.

'By day they would hide and rest. At night they would travel along roads and murder any helot that they caught... The historian Thucydides tells how over 2 000 helots were singled out by the Spartiates for their bravery, but then a little later they vanished, and nobody was able to explain how.'

ADAPTED FROM THE HISTORIAN PLUTARCH



Social class in the Spartan army

Social class played a large role in the formation and running of the Spartan army. It is believed that the Spartan army was formed partly to control helot revolts and **uprisings**. However, over time both helots and perioikoi were allowed to serve in the army.

The role of the helots in the Spartan army

Spartiate citizens had a great deal of pride in Sparta and, because of this, helots were not originally allowed to serve in the Spartan army. However, helots held a large amount of power because they made up the majority of Spartan society. Over time helots were allowed to serve in the army, but they were never allowed to train in the Agoge.



In the later years of Spartan society, helots could fight alongside Spartiate citizens in the army.

The role of the perioikoi in the Spartan army

The perioikoi were expected to fight as hoplites in the Spartan army during times of war. Like the helots, the perioikoi did not train for the Agoge. Until around 465 BCE the perioikoi and the Spartans fought separately, but records from the historian Herodotus indicate that they fought together after this time.



From the beginning of Spartan society, perioikoi were expected to fight alongside Spartiate citizens in battles.

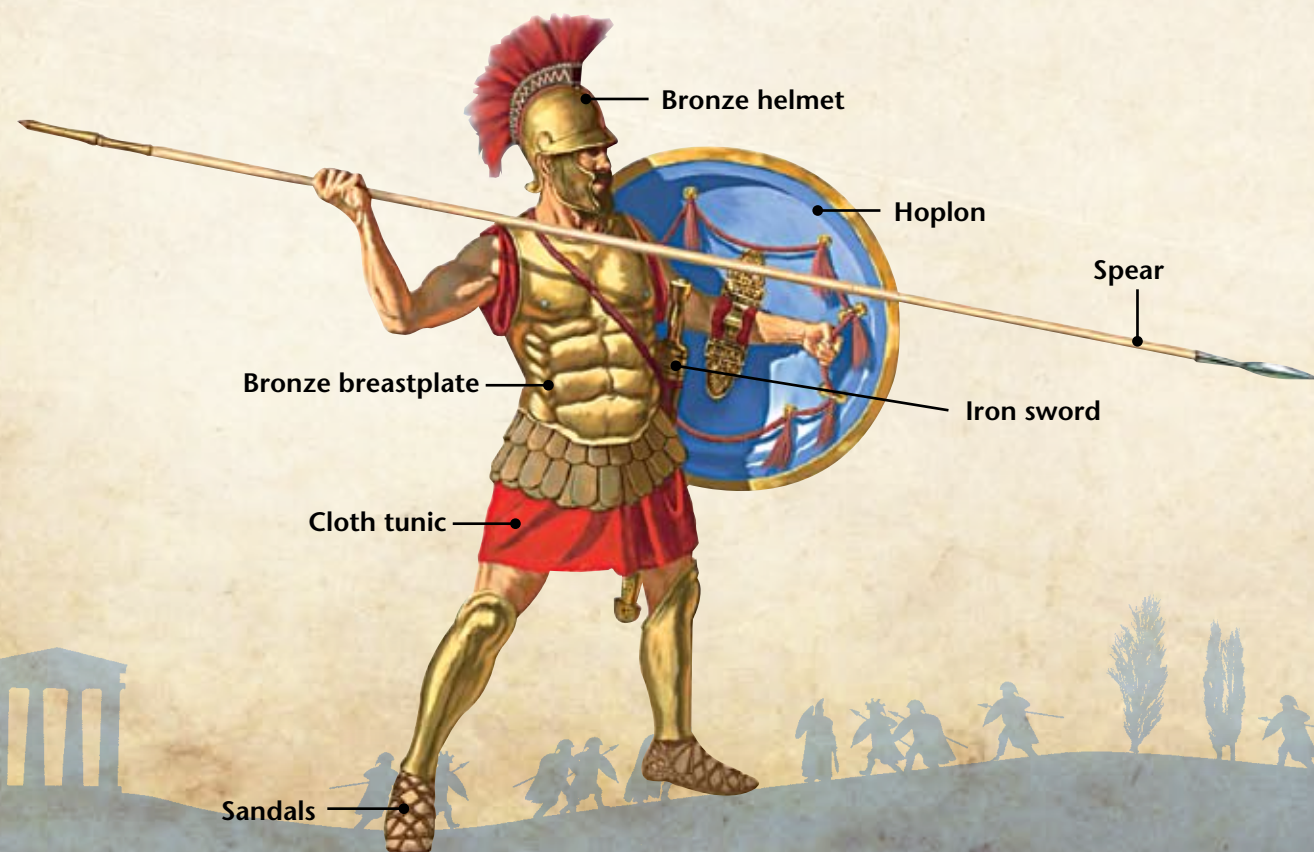
Spartan weapons, armour and warfare

The Spartans were the dominant force in the **Aegean** for 400 years. Their success was partly due to their weapons, armour and battle tactics.

Weapons and armour

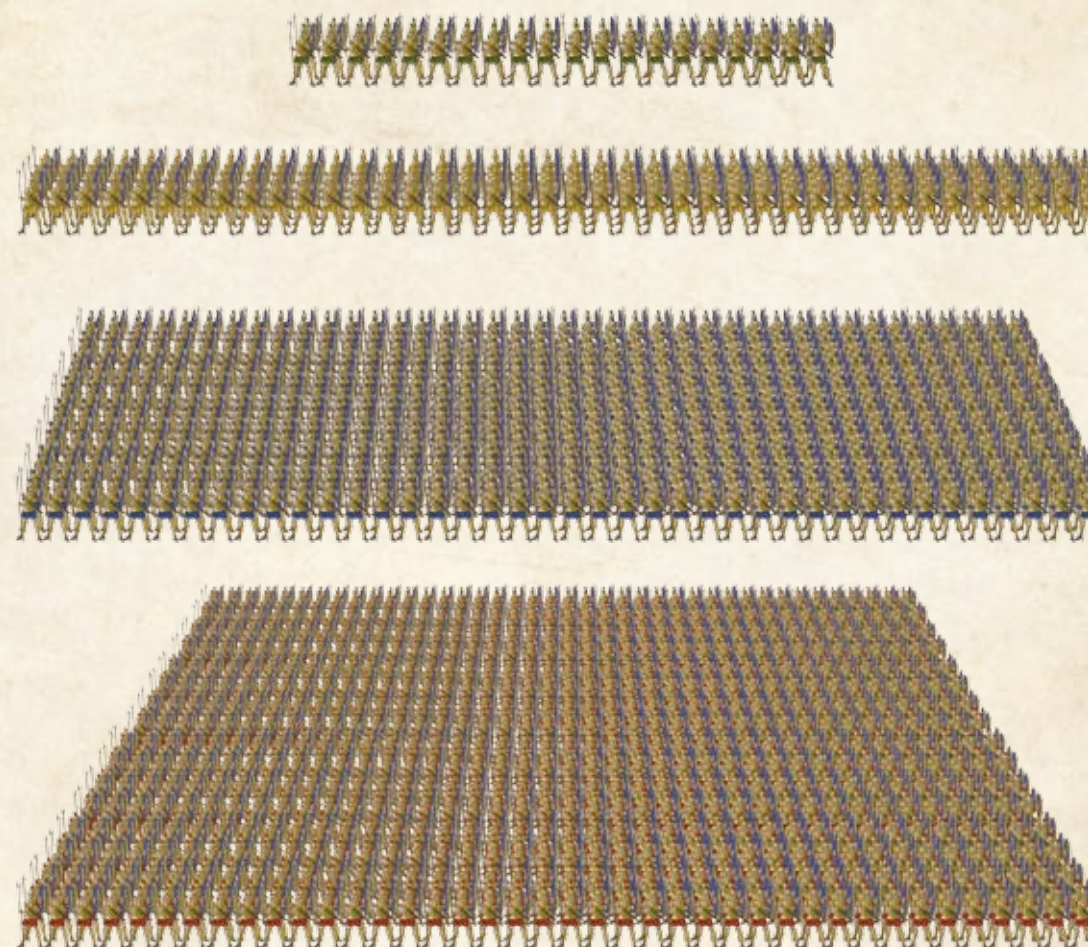
A Spartan hoplite carried a concave shield known as a hoplon. This shield was believed to be large enough to cover a hoplite's body from his thighs to his shoulders. He also carried a three-metre-long spear, used for thrusting, and an iron sword.

A Spartan hoplite wore **distinctive** armour. He wore a bronze breastplate over a cloth tunic, and a thin bronze helmet. This helmet was often decorated with a crest of horsehair. The well-known Spartan **lawgiver** Lykurgus also made each hoplite wear a crimson cloak, believing that this made them look less like women. Hoplites under 30 had short hair, while older hoplites could choose to grow their hair. All hoplites wore sandals.



Warfare

Spartan warfare was marked by the group strength and discipline that Spartan hoplites showed. The hoplites fought as a group, which was known as a **phalanx**.



An enomotia division was made up of four groups of eight men. Today, it is known as a platoon.

A pentekostys division was made up of four enomotiai. Today, it is known as a company.

A lochos division was made up of two pentekostyses. Today, it is known as a battalion.

A mora division was made up of four lochoi. Today, it is known as a regiment.

There were four different divisions in a Spartan phalanx.

Battle formations

The hoplites had many bold battle formations. In one formation, each hoplite would cover the right side of his body with his shield. The left side was covered by the shield of the hoplite standing next to him. With their shields locked together, the hoplites advanced on enemies as a group, forming a moving bronze wall that was difficult for enemies to penetrate. This formation was used successfully at the Battle of Plataea, during the Persian Wars.

SPOTLIGHT ON the Persian Wars

Spotlight on

WHAT: the Persian Wars
BETWEEN: the Persians and the Greeks
BEGAN: around 499 BCE
ENDED: around 448 BCE

The Persian Wars were fought between the Persians and the Greeks. The Greek city-states of Athens and Sparta were invaded by the Persian Empire on several occasions, and the wars that followed these invasions were defining moments in Sparta's history. Due to the strength of the Spartans and the Athenians, the Persian army never managed to conquer Greece.

Why did the Persian Wars occur?

The Persian Wars broke out because Sparta and Athens did not want to be controlled by Persia. Historians report that the Persians wanted the Greeks to serve in the Persian army and to pay extremely high taxes. The Greek city-states fought against the Persian invaders to maintain their independence from Persia.

Greek soldiers fought many bloody battles against the Persian invaders during the Persian Wars.



The Battle of Marathon was fought between the Athenian army and the Persian army.

Battles during the Persian Wars

Many battles were fought between the Greeks and the Persians during the Persian Wars.

- ❖ The Battle of Marathon occurred between the Athenian army and the Persian army. The Spartans were unwilling to help the Athenians. With an army one-third of the size of the Persian army, the Athenians defeated the Persians.
- ❖ The Battle of Thermopylae was fought by an alliance of Greek city-states. Although they were vastly outnumbered, the Spartan hoplites held off the Persian enemy for three days.
- ❖ The Battle of Salamis was a **naval** battle fought between the Greek city-states and Persia. It took place in the waters between Piraeus and Salamis. The victory of the Greek city-states in this battle is considered to be the turning point that led to final Persian defeat.
- ❖ The Battle of Plataea was fought between Sparta and Persia on the slopes of Mount Cithaeron. The Spartan army, made up of hoplites and helots, defeated the Persian army. This battle marks Persia's last attempt to invade Greece.



the Persian Wars timeline



SPOTLIGHT ON the Battle of Thermopylae

Spotlight on

WHAT: the Battle of Thermopylae

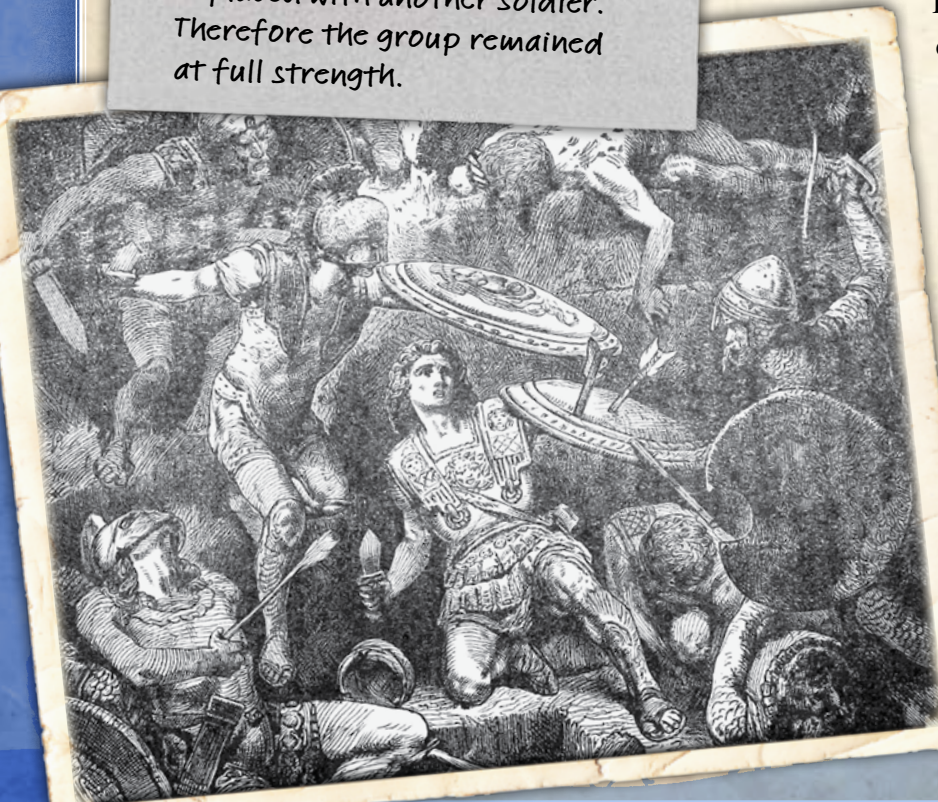
BETWEEN: Greek city-states
and Persia

WHEN: 480 BCE

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

The Immortals

The Immortals earned their name because every time one soldier would die, he was immediately replaced with another soldier. Therefore the group remained at full strength.



The Battle of Thermopylae is one of the most famous battles in Spartan history. There were said to be 1000 Persian soldiers for every Spartan hoplite present.

Thermopylae was a narrow road that cut through the mountains. It was the only way that the Persian army could pass through to Athens. During the battle, the Spartan army was betrayed by a local man, Ephialtes, and fell after three days of fighting.

The first days of battle

The Spartans were very successful during the first days of the battle. On the first day, they formed a phalanx near their camp behind the Phocian Wall. The historian Ctesias noted that the first waves of Persian troops to attack the camp were 'cut to pieces', while only two or three hoplites were killed. King Xerxes of Persia was angered by the Spartans' strength. He sent in his personal bodyguards and soldiers, known as the Immortals. These soldiers were also killed by the Spartans and their allies.

King Leonidas I was killed by Persian soldiers during the Battle of Thermopylae.

The turning point

The turning point in the battle came when a man from a nearby Greek city-state gave King Xerxes information in the hope of a great reward. He told King Xerxes about a mountain trail that led over the hills and into the Spartan camp. If the Persian army used this trail, they could surprise the Spartan hoplites and attack them from behind. King Xerxes marched troops over the trail and surrounded the Spartan soldiers. King Leonidas I, who was leading the Spartan army, managed to send away most of his troops. Only around 300 soldiers were left to defend the pass, and they fought to the death.



What you should know about...

The Battle of Thermopylae

- ❖ The Spartan army blocked the pass long enough to keep the Persian army occupied while the rest of the Greek soldiers escaped.
- ❖ It is believed that King Leonidas I sent most of his troops away so that they could prepare for the Battle of Salamis.
- ❖ The 300 Spartan hoplites who died defending the pass came to **embody** the Spartan ideal. They were seen as great examples of courage and self-sacrifice.

Three hundred Spartan soldiers defended the pass at Thermopylae.

Sparta's government

The Spartan government consisted of two kings, five ephors, the Gerousia and the Apella. The Gerousia was a council that had the power to try citizens in court, including the king, and the Apella represented Spartan **democracy**.

Spartan kings

Sparta had two kings, and they led the Spartan army. The kings were chosen from two royal families, the Agiads and the Eurypontids. According to Spartan legend, these families were descended from Hercules, the greatest of the Greek heroes.

Sparta was one of few Greek city-states to keep a monarchy, rather than change the government to a democracy. A Spartan king was expected to fill the roles of chief priest, commander-in-chief of the army, judge and lawgiver. The king always fought in battles. He led the soldiers into combat and was the last to leave the battlefield.

Sparta's kings could make laws to punish those who had committed a crime.



Spartan ephors

The ephors were the kings' advisors and **war tacticians**, as well as the chief administrators and executors of Sparta. They welcomed visiting **ambassadors**, held charge of the Agoge and could banish foreigners from Sparta. The ephors also had the power to imprison a king. This was a **safeguard** against **tyranny**. There were five ephors, one from each region of Sparta. They were elected annually and no man could serve in the role more than once. The ephors met daily to discuss issues.

The Gerousia

The Gerousia was a council of 38 men over the age of 60, and Sparta's two kings. This council served as Sparta's **aristocracy**. Although in theory any man could be elected to the Gerousia, in practice membership was very exclusive. Men from wealthy families were selected. The Gerousia prepared the business and agenda for the Apella. They also tried cases involving kings, and could apply penalties of death, loss of citizenship and exile.

The Apella

The Apella was a council of Spartiate citizens aged over 30, and they met monthly. The Apella elected the ephors and the Gerousia, passed laws, decided on matters of war and peace and resolved disputes. The Apella voted by **acclamation** and could only vote 'yes' or 'no'.

King Cleombrotus was advised by the ephors when he faced difficult decisions about Sparta and its army.



IN PROFILE: *King Leonidas I*

In profile

NAME: King Leonidas I

ALSO KNOWN AS: King of Sparta

BORN: 521 BCE

DIED: 480 BCE



King Leonidas I most likely came to power around 488 BCE. He was the son of Anaxandridas II, who ruled Sparta between 560 and 525 BCE. King Leonidas I is remembered for his bravery when leading the Spartan army at the Battle of Thermopylae in 480 BCE.

Notable moment

During the Battle of Thermopylae, King Leonidas I and the Spartan army put up a brave fight against the Persians. A small force of Greek soldiers blocked the only road through Thermopylae, and the Spartan army's role was to protect this narrow pass. It is believed that the Persian army outnumbered the Spartan army by more than 100 to 1. Despite this, King Leonidas I's men held back the Persian army for three days.

Betrayed to the Persians

The Spartan army was betrayed by a local man called Ephialtes, who told the Persians of a secret mountain pass that led behind the Spartan army. When King Leonidas I found out about this betrayal, he dismissed most of his army and stayed behind to fight with 300 Spartan hoplites. The Persians eventually killed King Leonidas I and his soldiers, then took the path. However, they suffered a large number of **casualties** at the hands of the hoplites.

What you should know about...

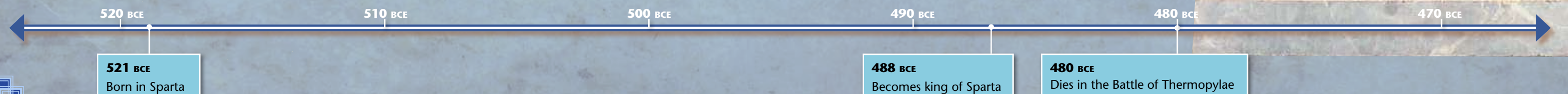
King Leonidas I and Thermopylae

- ❖ King Leonidas I only chose fathers to fight at Thermopylae. If they were killed, their sons could carry on the family name.
- ❖ After King Leonidas I was killed, the Spartan soldiers protected his body until they were killed.
- ❖ Historians have debated whether the king's final actions were heroic or foolish. The historian Herodotus suggested that the Battle of Thermopylae gave the armies that were sent home time to prepare for the Battle of Salamis.



This statue of King Leonidas I stands in Sparta today.

King Leonidas I timeline



Training to be a Spartan hoplite

The training system for Spartan hoplites was known as the Agoge. Training for the Agoge began at the age of seven and was not completed until the age of 30. Only boys were allowed to train for the Agoge.

Before the Agoge

The ephors inspected each boy born in Sparta ten days after his birth, to decide if he was fit to enter the Agoge. Any baby with **deformities** was thrown over the Apothetae, a cliff on Mount Taygetos. Those found free of deformities were allowed to join the Agoge.

Until the age of seven, boys were cared for by their mothers. Mothers were expected to teach their sons discipline and obedience in preparation for the Agoge.

The ephors inspected each boy born in Sparta to ensure that he did not have any deformities.



Spartan boys lived in military barracks and trained in a central courtyard called a dromos.

Early years of training

At age seven, boys left their families and moved to a barracks, which is a type of military housing. Boys lived in groups, which encouraged **comradery**. They learnt basic military skills, how to read and write and how to show obedience and responsibility. At age ten, they began to learn music, dancing and athletics. These activities taught them to be disciplined.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

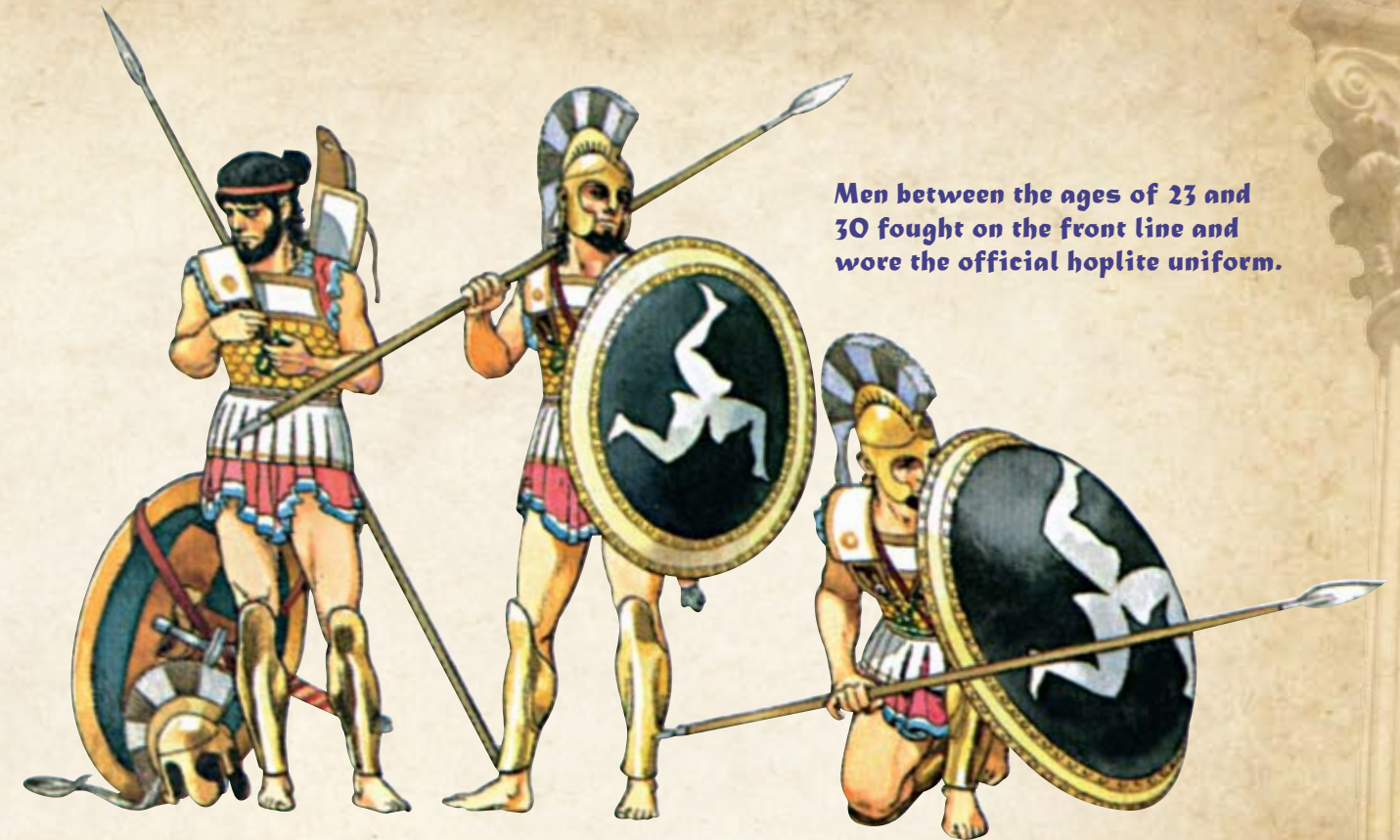
The running of the cheese

In the early years of training, Spartan boys often played a game called *the running of the cheese*. In this game, boys stole cheese from monks and brought it back to their barracks. The aim was to not get caught. Spartan hoplites were encouraged to learn how to steal, because they may have needed these skills to survive in times of war.

Middle years of training

From the ages of 12 to 18, Spartan boys gained more responsibility. At 12, boys exercised, slept on beds of **reeds** and learnt games that taught them endurance. They were fed **rations** and taught basic survival skills. They only wore one item of clothing and no shoes. At age 18, the boys were given the title of eiren. This allowed them to marry and serve in the Spartan army. However, they were not able to serve in the **front line** and those who chose to marry were not allowed to live with their wives until they had completed the Agoge training. Those with the title of eiren also held leadership roles over the younger boys in the Agoge.

When a Spartan boy was 18, he could serve in the Spartan army.



Men between the ages of 23 and 30 fought on the front line and wore the official hoplite uniform.

Late years of training

From the ages of 20 to 30, Spartan men became hoplites. At age 20 men joined clubs known as **syssitia**, in which groups of soldiers ate together and bonded. Between the ages of 23 and 29, men became full-time soldiers in the Spartan army. At age 30, men became Spartiate citizens and official hoplite soldiers. They were able to live at home and grow their hair.

Upon completing the Agoge training, groups of men were sometimes sent into the countryside, where they were forced to survive on their skill and strength. This was thought to be an **initiation** exercise. After this exercise, soldiers were passed into active reserve until the age of 60. This meant they could be called upon to fight when needed.

Quick facts

Did Spartan females receive any training?

Spartan females were not allowed to take part in the Agoge training but they received education and physical training.

- ❖ Spartan girls were raised by their mothers, who taught them reading, writing, dancing and gymnastics.
- ❖ Women in Sparta were expected to remain at their physical peak. The Spartans believed that fit parents made healthy children.

SPOTLIGHT ON the Battle of Plataea

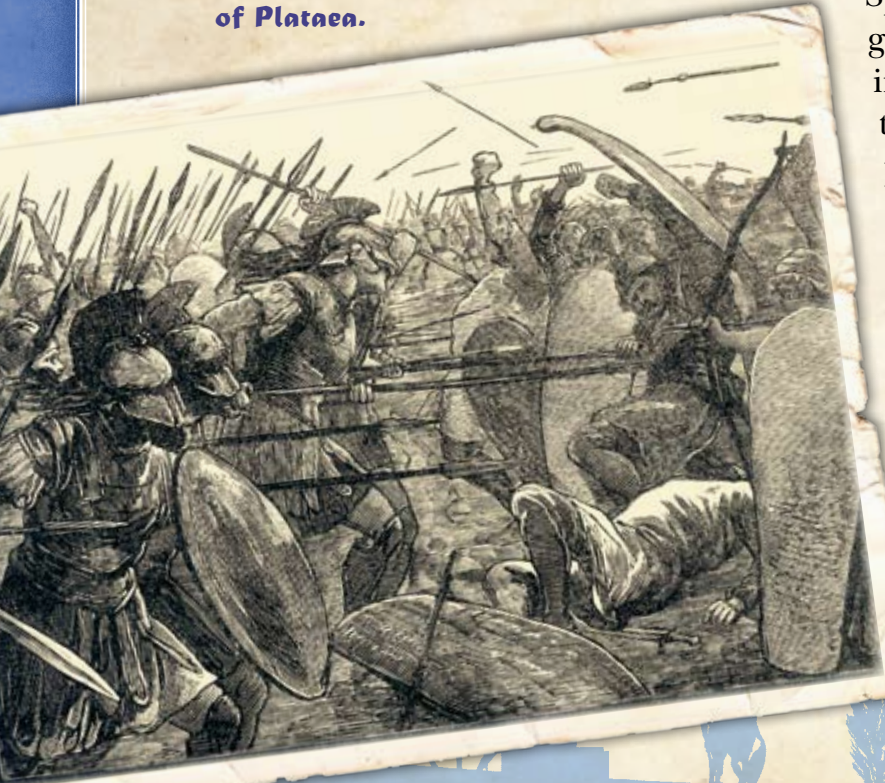
Spotlight on

WHAT: the Battle of Plataea

BETWEEN: Greece and Persia

WHEN: 479 BCE

Many Spartans were killed during the Battle of Plataea.



The Battle of Plataea was the first successful Greek offensive during the Persian Wars. It led to the end of the Persian Wars.

Origins of the battle

After the Battle of Salamis, King Xerxes returned to Persia and left his military general, Mardonius, to fight the Greeks. Mardonius captured Athens and burnt it to the ground. He then prepared to invade the nearby city of Plataea. The Plataeans asked the

Spartan army for help, and were sent the greatest force of Spartan soldiers ever seen in battle. The historian Herodotus noted that there were 5 000 hoplite soldiers, 5 000 periokoi and 35 000 helots. All were under the command of Pausanias, the leader of the Spartan army.

The Persian attack

After destroying Athens, Mardonius retreated to the city of Thebes, hoping to draw the Greeks into battle at nearby Plataea. He built a wooden palisade and positioned himself along the Asopus river near Plataea. The Greeks took position in the foothills of Mount Cithaeron, where the Persians attacked them repeatedly.

The turning point

Pausanias secretly moved his men down the foothills across the Asopus ridge. There they had access to fresh water in the Asopus spring and increased mobility. Mardonius ordered the poisoning of the Asopus spring, and soon after the Greeks had no fresh water. Most Greek soldiers moved to a location closer to Plataea. The Spartans, however, moved to the Cithaeron Hills, which was closer to the Persian army. The Persians' line of sight was blocked by the hills, and they only saw the other Greeks moving away. They rushed forward to attack, and ran into the Spartan army.

Outcome of the battle

The Spartans won the battle because their weapons and skills were superior to the Persians'. They fought with vigour to avenge the death of King Leonidas I, who was killed at the Battle of Thermopylae. During the battle, Mardonius was killed, and Pausanias became the first leader to defeat the Persians.

Spartan soldiers formed a wall of shields and shot arrows at Persian soldiers, who thought that all Greek soldiers had retreated.



The Battle of Plataea timeline

DAY 1

DAY 2

DAY 3

DAY 4

DAY 5

DAY 6

DAY 7

DAY 8

DAY 9

DAY 10

DAY 11

DAY 12

DAY 13

DAY 1

Mardonius attacks the Greeks, who hold their position

DAYS 2-7

The Greek army surrounds the left, right and centre of the Persian army but does not attack

DAY 8

Mardonius destroys the Greeks' water supply, to provoke them into attacking

DAYS 9-11

The Greeks hold their position, despite their lack of supplies

DAY 12

Mardonius poisons the Asopus Spring

DAY 13

The Greeks attack the Persians and win

IN PROFILE: *King Xerxes*

In profile

NAME: King Xerxes
TITLE: King of Persia
BORN: 519 BCE
DIED: 465 BCE

King Xerxes was the son of King Darius I of Persia, and he ruled over the Persian Empire from 485 BCE until 465 BCE. Most of what is known about King Xerxes was written by Greek sources, so the information about him is often negative.

History tends to judge King Xerxes by his failed attempts to conquer Greece. However, he also expanded the Persian Empire and built many great halls and monuments.

Infamous moment

King Xerxes is remembered for his decision to invade Greece. Shortly before his death, Xerxes' father, King Darius I, had attempted to invade Greece but failed. King Xerxes planned to invade Greece for the second time. This invasion led to the Persian Wars between the Persian army and the Greek city-states.

King Xerxes and his wife, Queen Esther, were popular with the Persian people.



King Xerxes completed work on the city of Persepolis, the capital of the Persian Empire.

Building halls and monuments

King Xerxes oversaw the building of many great halls and monuments, including:

- ❖ the Apadana, an audience hall
- ❖ the Hall of a Hundred Columns, a throne room
- ❖ the Gate of All Nations, also known as the Xerxes gate
- ❖ the Dwelling Place, also known as the Xerxes Palace.

He also completed work on the Persian capital of Persepolis, which was begun by his father, King Darius I.

What you should know about...

King Xerxes

- ❖ King Xerxes's father seized power of the Persian Empire before Xerxes was born. All Persian kings were supposed to show that they were related to Cyrus the Great, but King Darius was not.
- ❖ Xerxes was Darius's second son. He was given the throne because his mother was believed to be related to Cyrus the Great.
- ❖ Throughout his time as king, Xerxes sought to **legitimise** his rule, because his father was not related to Cyrus the Great.

The decline of the Spartan hoplites

Historians believe that the decline of the Spartan hoplites occurred due to reduced numbers of Spartiate citizens, and the Theban defeat of Sparta.

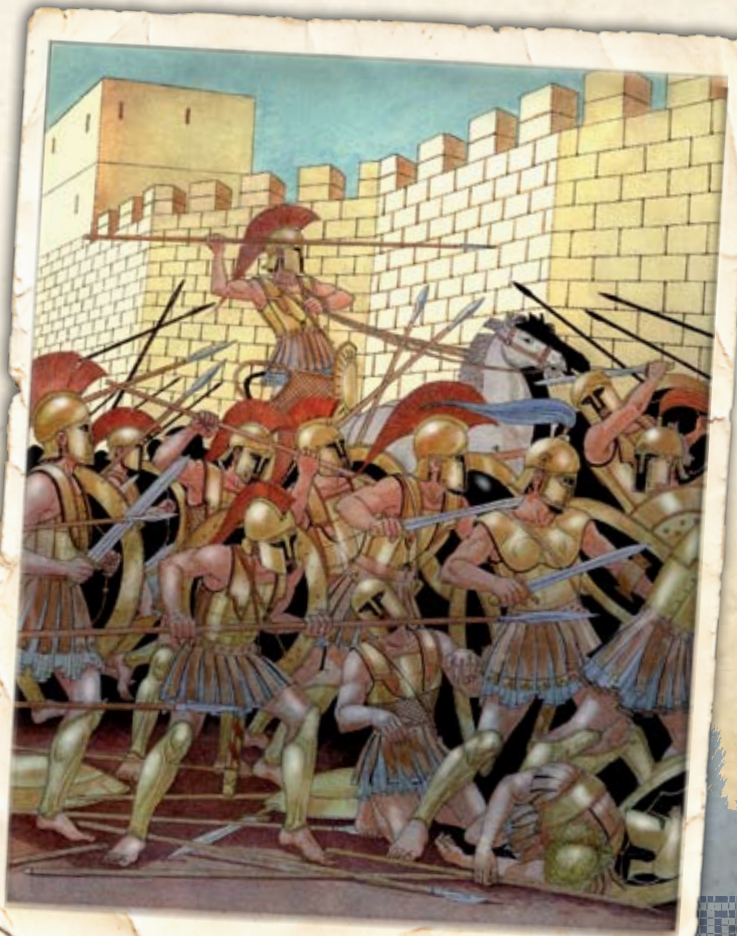
Decrease in Spartiate citizens

As the number of Spartiate citizens decreased, there were fewer citizens available to fight in the Spartan army. At the beginning of the 500s BCE there was thought to be around 10 000 Spartiate citizens, yet by around 250 BCE there were believed to be less than 700 citizens. The conservative aristocracy of Sparta was not willing to allow the periokoi to become citizens. As the number of Spartiate citizens decreased, Sparta's land and wealth were held by fewer and fewer families. The gap between rich Spartiate citizens and the periokoi and helots became larger and larger.

Defeat by the Thebans

The Theban defeat of Sparta played a significant role in the decline of the Spartan hoplites. In 371 BCE, the Battle of Leuktra was fought between the Thebans and the Spartan army. The Spartan army was defeated and many of the best Spartan hoplites were killed. The Spartan economy collapsed, and Spartan traditions and ways of living were replaced with those of the Thebans.

The Theban army overthrew Sparta and replaced the Spartan hoplites with Theban soldiers.



Glossary

acclamation speaking aloud

Aegean the body of water and land on which Athens and Sparta were located

alliance an agreement between two groups to support each other in times of war

ambassadors representatives from other city-states or empires

aristocracy a social class holding titles that are passed down through families

casualties people injured or killed during conflicts

citizens members of a society

city-state an independent state with its own government, made up of a city and surrounding villages

comradery friendship and loyalty among a group of people

conquered defeated with force

deformities parts of a person's body that do not look or work as others' do

democracy a system of government in which the people vote to elect leaders

distinctive unique and easy to identify

embody represent

front line the sites where battles are fought

initiation a ceremony or task that a person must perform to join a select group

lawgiver a person who makes laws for a society

legitimise make lawful or prove something

monarchy a type of government ruled by a monarch, such as a king

naval fought with navy ships

offensive military attack

ordained ordered or commanded

outcasts people who have been rejected from a society

palisade a fence made of sticks or pointed logs

phalanx a group of Greek soldiers who fought together while heavily armed

public humiliation being shamed or disgraced in front of others

rations a fixed amount of food and drink

reeds tall grasses that are hollow and flexible

revolt attempt to overthrow the government

safeguard a legal protection or guard

social classes groups of people with different degrees of importance in a society

stealth moving quietly to avoid being seen

stipulated agreed upon or set out

superior better than

tyranny a system of government headed by a tyrant, who uses fear to control others

uprisings slaves rising against the authority of their masters

war tacticians people who are skilled at planning military campaigns

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