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Athens and Sparta

Athens and Sparta were the two most important poleis in early Greece. Athens was the larger of the two and served as the center of education, art and science. Located in northeastern Greece, at its peak the polis was home to more than 300,000 inhabitants. Sparta was a militaristic, authoritarian society that devalued individual expression and freedom, requiring its inhabitants to instead pledge full obedience to the state. Located in the southern Peloponesus of Greece, about 80 miles from Athens, the main city was smaller in size and surrounded by many smaller pastoral villages. While Athens and Sparta were radically different from one another in many ways, both respected and supported one another through much of the Hellenic period until the Peloponnesian War occurring approximately a century before the dawn of the Hellenistic Age.

At the conclusion of the Dark Age circa 800 BCE, and while the polis was becoming established as the primary political-territorial unit throughout Greece, Athens went through many forms of government, including monarchy, aristocracy, oligarchy and democracy. Definite history regarding Athens begins after 750 BCE. Initially a monarchy existed, but was gradually replaced by aristocrats in the coming two and a half centuries. In the 500s, power was transferred to oligarchs, which were comprised of both nobly born individuals and wealthy commoners. It was during this time that the oligarch Solon was given supreme power by other rulers to quell discontent. Solon

established a constitution that failed in its objectives; this led to more conflict and unrest. Others followed Solon in ruling the polis absolutely, but this eventually created the necessary conditions for an aristocrat named Cleisthenes to seize control of power in Athens and found Athenian democracy in 508 BCE. Cleisthenes believed that people should exercise control over the government, not only because it was just and fair, but also because he considered it to be more effective. Interestingly, it was the failed attempts at more traditional forms that assisted in the creation of this new and unusual type of government.

Athens's democracy also loosely coincided with Greece's Classical Age, circa 470 to 300 BCE. During this time, Greek contributions to Western civilization abounded in the fine arts and in philosophy (the love of wisdom). Some of the greatest philosophers in history taught during this time, including Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. From these and others, new philosophies such as Cynicism, Epicureanism and Stoicism were developed and attracted the more educated in the population. The lower classes in Athens and other poleis adopted a humanistic religion, which was different from other agrarian civilizations the world had known in that human beings occupied a position in the cosmos that was second only to the gods. Perhaps it is odd that in such a culture-rich and developing society the women of Athens were mistrusted and considered the properties of men. Regardless, the fantastic achievements during this time in Greece are referred to as Hellenic culture, and in these things Athens played an incredibly significant role.

The polis of Sparta originally shared similarities with Athens and other parts of Greece, but over time became different in nearly all ways. Winning a war with its

closest neighbor Messenia circa 700 BCE, and the subsequent rebellions of the conquered Messenian people (called helots), contributed greatly to Sparta becoming culturally different from most other parts of Greece: the populace became soldiers and helpers of soldiers. People voluntarily abdicated individual freedoms. Fine arts and expressions of individualism became unimportant and unnecessary in daily life. The people's devotions were centered solely on Sparta's militarism.

Interestingly, Sparta was not an aggressive state. Because its army was so large, capable and feared, it rarely needed to go to war. Gender roles in society were also unique from other parts of Greece. Male children entered barracks at the age of seven and spent their entire lives in the service of the military. Women had high status, many freedoms, were given an education, and possessed economic power and influence (*Sparta Reconsidered*). The government was a dual monarchy, which oversaw a group of elected officials called ephors. These societal characteristics served the polis of Sparta effectively into the 300s BCE.

Aside from sharing a common language and the surrounding land and sea areas of the Mediterranean, the poleis Athens and Sparta are markedly different from one another. The distance between each society's valuations of arts, governance, gender roles, etc. is staggering, yet the two states managed to live in relative peace with one another for many centuries. It is fascinating that these two societies were located so closely to one another but were somehow conducted uniquely and successfully. I would imagine that this has to be one of the more important mysteries in Greek history. I also find it odd that it was the more culturally diverse and less militaristic Athens that, after refusing to heed a warning from Sparta, disrupted the harmony in Greece by attacking

Corinth. While Sparta emerged from this war victorious, Greece was unable to form an effective central government and it was injurious to all involved,

Works Cited

Sparta Reconsidered. "‘Scandalous’ Spartan Women: Educated and Economically Empowered." Helena P. Schrader.
<http://www.elysiumgates.com/~helena/Women.html>. Accessed February 27, 2011.