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Greek Culture Clash

The movie *300* is riveting. Scene after scene a fleet of 300 Spartans battle a near impossible army from Persia. They inevitably, are defeated. However, their pride, honor, and courage remain. It’s in a scene of this movie where my question sparked from and where I think my answer may lie. On the Spartans track to where they planned to fight the Persians, they crossed the city of Athens, where they discovered the city burning to the ground. How could the grand city of Athens fall so easily? Their vast buildings, and great statues falling like the rain, all the while Sparta had decided to send 300 men to battle thousands. In ancient Greece, Athens greatly valued the concept of architecture and study, while Sparta was centered on military and loyalty to the state.

Athens, a place where the upstanding citizens were glorified and the rest, just cattle in the eyes of a herd. “In Athens, society was male-dominated – only men could be citizens and only upper-class males enjoyed a formal education. Women had few political rights and were expected to remain in the home and bear children” (Everyday Life in Ancient Greece). Society in Athens proves to be extremely old-fashioned, as one might think. They also fully incorporated slaves into their daily lives and leaned on them for tasks that were too low for the elite citizens to do themselves. “Fully one quarter of the population was made up of slaves, usually prisoners captured during the many clashes that extended Greek influence overseas. These slaves provided much of the manpower that fueled the burgeoning economy, working in shipyards, quarries, mines, and as domestic servants” (Everyday Life in Ancient Greece). Athens however, made great contributions to Greek culture. Great, world-renowned philosophers were born in Athens, the likes of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle who each made overwhelming contributions to ethics, biology, logic, the list goes on. Athens was also a place to study not just philosophy, but the arts. “Greek theatre began in the sixth century BCE in Athens with the performance of tragedy plays at religious festivals” (Classical Greek Culture). Athens has shown us to be a land where philosophy, study, and architecture are first among their culture and values.

In Sparta there was one form of art, war. Men were born soldiers, and women strong enough to stand beside them. “The sole business of a Spartan citizen was war. The intensive training the soldiers received resulted in the belief that they had the best army in the classical world” (Plato). Women in Sparta were also treated as soldiers, of their home, and homeland. “Women in Sparta had more rights than those in Athens. Spartan women could legally own and inherit property and they were usually better educated than in the rest of the Greek city-states. Girls went through the same went through the same physical training as was given to boys” (Plato).  In Sparta there ruled two kings, a council of elders, and the assembly. Two kings was in place in case one king was gone during a time of war, the council of elders consisted of 30 men over the age of sixty that oversee the city-state, and the assembly was made up of citizens. All laws had to approved by the assembly in order to be passed (Plato). Sparta was a society that valued military and loyalty to the state above all, where only the strong survived.

Sparta and Athens, bitter rivals that never agreed on government, women’s rights, slaves, and even core values and these all played a part into their very differing cultures. Sparta valued military and loyalty to the state, where all were treated equal, although all were not created equal because of their belief in a born soldier ideal. Athens valued philosophy, architecture, arts, and study. Two unrivaled Greek societies that only had each other to hate and admire.