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A Comparison of Athens and Sparta

The Greeks of ancient times were warrior tribes who had a common language but fought incessantly with each other struggling for the possession of the most rich and fertile lands. By the beginning of 5th century B.C. there were about four and a half million men in Greece. It was at this time that Athens emerged as the most powerful of the city states. The city emerged as the cultural capital of the entire Greek world and it was the cradle of contemporary western science and philosophy. The Athenian empire reached its zenith during Pericles's life time. The city was full of splendor and Athenians themselves believed it to be the 'City of God'.

On the other hand, Sparta represented to a totally different world. It had its own philosophy about administration, military, education and marriage. It also differed from Athens on ideas about the nature of relationship with other Greek empires. Although Sparta was a strong military state, it was content to remain in its territory and didn't indulge in warfare for acquisitions of new territories. On the other hand, Athens had expansionist policies. It wanted to get hold of more and more Greek territories. This expansionist policy of Athens, proposed by Pericles, led to war between the two states which ended with the defeat of Athens.

Athens suffered defeat at the hands of Sparta. Although Athenians were world renowned for their superior naval units, they succumbed to the Spartan military expertise. The reason for Spartan victory can be attributed to the upbringing and training of the Spartan soldiers. This demands an in-depth investigation into the similarities and dissimilarities of the two states. The Spartans differed from Athenians in many ways. The main points around which the commonalities or differences between the two states can be discussed are *Economy, Art, Lifestyle, Women, Military and Sexuality*.

The *economic* or financial policies of a nation or state depend on the nature of politics prevalent in the country. Athens and Sparta were similar on this feature because both the states' governments were elected by people. While the Athenian government pioneered the democratic system, Sparta was a military aristocracy (McNesse, 31). In Athens, participation came from all walks of life. Although there were restrictions on women, men were free to discuss new ideas in the assembly. On the other hand, Sparta had much more inflexible political framework. Its own ideologies and policies made Sparta politically and economically less active. Out of the two, Athens was more economically active. It was at the centre of a great trading network that dealt with goods from as far the Britain in the west to India in the east, bringing untold wealth into the city. This trade and Athens's expansionist ambitions led to the building of Athenian naval empire which stretched across the Aegean Sea.

Agriculture was the mainstay of Athenian economy. It also prospered because of the profits brought by mining and metal crafts. As said earlier, trade also played an important part in Athens' economy. This is a feature where there lie stark differences between the two empires. In Sparta, economic activities were carried outside the city while there was no such thing with Athens. Sparta also lacked a currency system, a system which was very well developed in

Athens. This meant that Sparta not only had very less interaction with the outside world, it also lay dormant as far as trade was concerned.

Art is a dimension where the two empires Athens and Sparta differed a lot. During the period of coexistence of Sparta and Athens, Athens produced some of the greatest sculptors and philosophers of all time. Socrates, Phidias and Plato were philosophers who still represent the immortal soul of Greek art and Philosophy. On the other hand, Sparta was only concerned with its military glory. Although early Sparta produces marvelous pottery, it was no match to Athenian art and mathematics. Athens was a place where thinking flourished whereas Sparta nourished the strength of a person.

The cities of Sparta and Athens offered different kinds of *lifestyles* to its citizens. Athens nourished almost every different aspect of modern western civilization. Even in 5th century when most of the other civilizations were struggling to achieve harmony and prosperity, Athens provided a lifestyle which is still inconceivable in many parts of the world. Citizens of Athens lived an extremely comfortable and enjoyable life. There was physical security for the people and hence families flourished and every section of the society reaped economic benefits. Women in Athens had their restrictions but men of upper class enjoyed infinite amount of diversions. They were free to pursue their favorite vocations and if they were not working, they would meet their friends and drink together at the symposium. The lifestyle of Athens was very flexible and permissive. They believed in rational thought and open-mindedness. But the case was completely different with Spartans. They focused more on developing military strength and obedience to orders received. Unlike Athens, Sparta wasn't interested in interacting with other empires.

It is surprising to know that *women* in Athens were more restricted than women in Sparta. During the day a wife in Athens tended to the children and the house while the husband led a more public life in politics or commerce. Wives were not permitted to attend to the symposium. Athenians believed that women were incapable of rational thought and hence there is little literature available on women of Athens. But on the basis of the material that is available, it can be said that women in Athens were much more dependent on their husbands and fathers. On the other hand, Spartan girls were much more independent and enjoyed many rights such as right to property.

The role of women was clearly defined in both Athens and Sparta. Sparta focused on producing great soldiers and so boys weren't allowed to work. They practiced the art of war throughout their life. The role of girls was to grow up and be mothers of warriors. The women were not allowed to fight it was necessary for them to take part in exercises and training so that they achieve physical fitness and are able to produce healthy babies. There was also difference in the marrying age of the girls. In Athens girls were married at the age of 12 or 14 and after marriage they were expected to stay at home. Political and religious participation was forbidden for them. On the other hand Spartan girls were allowed to participate in outdoor activities and they were married around the age of eighteen.

One interesting difference between the two empires was the manner in which female beauty was appreciated. Spartan women stayed away from any artificiality as they were only judged on the basis of their physique and athletic prowess (Synnott, 38). On the contrary Athenian women embellished themselves with enormous amount of makeup. One interesting and well known fact is that the first ever female to win gold at the Olympics was a Spartan. Spartan

princess Cynisca was the first female Olympic victor when she won the four-horse chariot race in 396 BC and then again in 392 B.C (Buchanan, 201).

Sparta was a *military* regime like no other in history. Forever under the cloud of war, the entire nation lived like an army. Upon entering the world, a Spartan infant was examined by the city's elders. If it was not healthy and sturdy, it would be flung into a river and left to die (Encyclopedia, 111). Sparta produced one of its most famous warriors named Aristodemus. He prepared all his life for war. Surviving his first immediate trial after birth, Aristodemus was bathed not in water but wine to steal his constitution. Then he was handed over to a slave nurse so that he would not be cuddled. He was fed plain food and taught not to fear the dark or being alone.

This kind of life was unimaginable for a head of Athens who was surrounded by the finer things of life. Spartan citizen males were taken at the age of seven to be trained as warriors whereas in Athens all citizens' males were expected to do two years military training from the age of eighteen. Sparta created a legacy of its own by bringing forward soldiers such as Aristodemus. It was because of all these reasons Sparta was most the powerful state in all of Greece. In 404 B.C. it defeated its proud archrival Athens.

Homosexuality was a common feature between the two empires. In Athens it was common for older men to fall in love with the young men usually 'before the whiskers appeared' on the chin. They would have homosexual relationship with young boys aged 16-19. Many Greek philosophers such as Plato have openly declared their love for younger males (Budin, 73). On the other hand, Spartan homosexuality was more common among teenagers although adult Spartans indulged in wife swapping in order to 'produce healthy children'. The aspect of

homosexuality sexuality is common between the empires. But Athenians were not known to be practicing wife-swapping. In fact they were very dedicated to their families, trying to protect their young boys from the homosexual adults of the society.

It can be seen from the above facts that there were many similarities and differences between Spartan and Athenian cities. It is fascinating to see so much diversity in two cities which were not too far away from each other and yet it appears that they belong to two different universes. But at the same time there are many common points which brought these universes closer to each other. Both the cities have become immortal in the minds of people for their uniqueness. While Athens is a model for thinkers, philosophers, artists, politicians and dramatists, Sparta continues to inspire societies and individuals with military interests.

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