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# The Educational Systems of Sparta and Athens

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THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS OF SPARTA AND ATHENS

by

Robin N. Phillips  
Bachelor of Arts, Wheaton College, 1992

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

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This thesis, submitted by Robin M. Phillips in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.

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This thesis meets the standards for appearance, conforms to the style and format requirements of the Graduate School of the University of North Dakota, and is hereby approved.

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## CONTRASTING EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS IN SPARTA AND ATHENS

Greece reached its zenith in power and strength in the fourth and fifth centuries B.C. Two of its primary cities, Sparta and Athens, evolved into extremely different societies, partly as a result of their educational systems. Sparta's system placed physical training over mental ability and therefore, focused on military training. Athens, on the other hand, stressed the mental arts of thought, philosophy, and reasoning. They, too, emphasized physical acumen, but for the purpose of sport and beauty, not war. Athens' teachers sought to teach their students to learn, to grow, and to excel. Spartan teachers trained and strictly disciplined their students. In consequence, the educational systems of Sparta and Athens differed not only in their approach, but also in their results.

Scholars have long held that Sparta's educational system was static, while Athens' system was dynamic. In this paper I will examine this assumption and put forth the evidence for my thesis that Sparta did not merely remain static, but actually declined, while Athens, although

dynamic because its system constantly changed, did not progress as easily or consistently as long believed.

There were no formal attempts to describe the current educational systems of Sparta or Athens for future generations by any of the ancient writers. Therefore, I found my information in a variety of authors: philosophers, teachers, playwrights, and biographers. Each one provided varying amounts of information within the context of their medium: philosophical treatises, dialogues, plays, and biographies. The primary sources which I mainly used include Plutarch, Plato, Xenophon, Aristophanes, and Aristotle.

From Plutarch I found information about Lycurgus and Spartan practices from his Parallel Lives. Written in the beginning of the second century A.D., Parallel Lives is a collection of a series of biographies of one Greek and one Roman life. He follows each pair of biographies with a comparison of the two personalities.

Plutarch was a moralist, though, and not an historian. He lived and wrote during a prosperous and untroubled time in the Roman empire - the years 45 to 120 A.D. He travelled widely, collected information, and served as a consul and procurator of Greece.<sup>1</sup>

Plutarch did not strive for a strict interpretation of events, but related stories and anecdotes as he heard them.



His numbers are often wrong and he occasionally contradicts himself.<sup>2</sup> More damaging than these errors is his tendency to relate stories which he himself admits are not likely to be true. However, Plutarch is still a valuable source of information as he does provide views of the lives and times of his subjects. The entire accuracy of his works may be doubted, but they are also works of great detail and scope.

Plato, too, was not an historian, but a philosopher. He wrote between the years 396 and 347 B.C. I used a variety of his works including the Republic, Gorgias, Sophist, and Protagoras. As he is critical of the current educational system in Athens, he wishes to change it. This desire possibly led him to over-criticize or exaggerate the problems. Yet from Plato's descriptions of the system's faults we are able to ascertain some facts about Athenian education in his lifetime.

Active between the years 390 and 354 B.C., Xenophon was the author of the Symposium and the Memorabilia. In the Symposium he described the common meals of Greek men, while in the Memorabilia he portrayed the life of Socrates.

Difficulties with Xenophon center around his prejudice for Sparta which color his writings.<sup>3</sup> It is not unusual for an author to write favorably about a well-loved subject, but Xenophon was especially careless. His value remains in that he was an eyewitness during the time period about which he

wrote. Although Xenophon could have been more accurate, he does give us confirmation of information in other accounts about the educational systems.

Aristophanes, a playwright, was another important source on education. Although he wrote many plays between 425 and 405 B.C., I have primarily used Frogs and Clouds. In these plays he alludes to educational topics, mocks certain practices, and satirizes Socrates. Like Plato, Aristophanes' words can be hostile, yet it is still possible to glean information from them.

Active in the fourth century B.C., Aristotle dedicated himself to biology, science, and the natural world and did not consider himself an historian.<sup>4</sup> But his interests included a wide range of material including physics, metaphysics, ethics, politics, and rhetoric. It is his Laws and Politics that I have found most useful. His authorship is not doubted and there is no reason to suppose that he is trying to mislead the reader with wrong information. Aristotle was a person who observed, questioned, and recorded. It seems unlikely that he would dispose of his methodology when writing on unscientific matters. Therefore, Aristotle has been a reliable and trustworthy source for my purposes.

For the various sophists, I used quotes from a number of sources. Many of the sophists are mentioned only once or

twice by one or two authors. Therefore, there is not a substantial amount of information to back up either their existence or what has been attributed to them. However, I believe that the particular authors I used had no motive to lie or fabricate the existence of certain sophists, so I worked on the assumption that they were real people.

A final difficulty rested in the amount of material about Greek education in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. There is considerably less information available for Sparta's educational system than for Athens' system.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Plutarch, Plutarch's Lives, 4 vols., trans. John Dryden, ed. Arthyr Hugh Clough (New York: The Modern Library, 1992), p. vi.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. xxi.

<sup>3</sup>Greece and the Hellenistic World, eds. John Boardman, Jasper Griffin, Oswyn Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 191.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 240-244.

## THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM AT SPARTA

All the ancient written sources attribute Sparta's educational system to a man named Lycurgus. Whether or not he was a real person, the reforms passed in his name both structured and maintained Sparta's education. These reforms were probably enacted about 900 or 800 B.C., although some scholars suggest a date as late as 600 B.C.

Plutarch is the primary source that we have to tell us of Lycurgus. He states that there was confusion about the person of Lycurgus: the family he came from, when he lived, and what he accomplished.<sup>1</sup> In his Life of Lycurgus, Plutarch gives us what he believes are the most trustworthy answers to these questions.

First, he believed the evidence pointed to Lycurgus being the son of Eunomus and his second wife, Dionassa.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, he explains that Lycurgus must have been "of great antiquity" because Xenophon reported him to be a contemporary of the Heraclidae, although some chronologers placed Lycurgus during the Olympic games of the eighth century B.C. or later.<sup>3</sup>

A possible theory, which Plutarch relates, but does not give his personal opinion of, is that there were two people of the same name who lived at different times. The actions of both were later confused and combined to give the appearance that there was just one man.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, Plutarch expands on the deeds and events of Lycurgus' life. He does not pretend to give a pure and wholly accurate account, but endeavors to write "adhering to those statements which are least contradicted, and depending upon those authors who are most worthy of credit."<sup>5</sup>

Plutarch is not our only source about Lycurgus, however. Herodotus, a traveller and writer of the fifth century B.C., also spoke of Lycurgus establishing new laws and traditions.<sup>6</sup> Herodotus considered his sources reliable and related events as he believed them to be true. Therefore, we may be reasonably certain that reforms not only took place in Sparta, but that these must be attributed to a man (or men) named Lycurgus.

The Spartans believed that the state is everything to its citizens. The individual and his needs are secondary to the needs of the state and the citizenry as a whole. In other words, the security of the commonwealth and therefore, the state, came before an individual's safety, comfort, and even life. The Spartan educational system fostered this idea by its very content and structure. Marriage,

recreation, war, wealth, and education supported the state's welfare.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, Spartans believed that the sole purpose of education was to prepare young men for state military service.

In order to fulfill this purpose, Spartan education centered on three tenets. First, youths could only be excellent state citizens by learning absolute and unquestioning obedience to the leaders.<sup>8</sup> Secondly, youths would learn to endure the rigors of war with courage and fortitude if properly trained.<sup>9</sup> Thus, both their bodies and minds suffered hardship and discomfort during their time of training. The ancient Greeks believed this practice would keep the men from idleness, effeminacy, and cowardice.

Finally, Spartan men learned to conquer in battle--not only by physical force, but also with the mind.<sup>10</sup> The body would win the war, but the mind would rule the empire. Therefore, Spartans learned to control their own emotions and prejudices in order to rule in such a manner that they retained their hold over foreign peoples.

Individuals received prestige and reknown from fellow citizens for certain characteristics: loyalty to the state, courage in the face of battle, and victory in war. Spartans placed such a high regard on these goals that the soldiers considered attaining these rewards at any cost, even death.<sup>11</sup>

The leaders also fostered sacrifice for the commonwealth, and honor above all else in Sparta's countrymen. These goals, achieved through Sparta's educational methods, were due in large part to the Lycurgan system.

According to Plutarch, Lycurgus believed that the "most important and noblest work of a lawgiver"<sup>12</sup> was the education of the youth. Unlike the rest of Greece, Lycurgus required education for both Spartan men and women. He insisted that women be strong, mentally and physically, for two reasons. First, he maintained that strong women would bear strong men. Secondly, he realized strong women would endure childbirth better themselves, thus maintaining a healthier population of both sexes.<sup>13</sup>

The Lycurgan system also strongly encouraged marriage. Bachelors were often objects of scorn and even punished.<sup>14</sup> Spartans believed that marriage's main objective was the birth of sons for military service to fulfill the need for an unconquerable military state. Sparta itself had few citizens, but those few were responsible for holding and protecting a large empire. Therefore, marriage became an instrument to strengthen the state. But, the ultimate purpose of marriage was the production of children who could then become soldiers or mothers of soldiers.



Sparta's grand military strategy required that children be conditioned for military service from birth. According to Plutarch, Lycurgus held that children became more the property of the commonwealth than the parents, and that education started from infancy.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, Spartan leaders viewed newborn babies as potential citizens and soldiers. Shortly after a child was born, the elders from whichever tribe the infant's parents belonged, examined the baby at an unidentified place called Lesche. They decided whether or not the child was well-formed, healthy, and strong or instead, appeared weak, sickly, small, or deformed. If the latter opinion dominated, they exposed the child at a chasm called Apothetae, found at the foot of Mount Taygetus.<sup>16</sup> The parents, as good citizens, allowed their child to be destroyed in the best interests of the state.

Lycurgus and other Spartans accepted this practice, for they viewed the breeding of children the same as the breeding of horses or dogs.<sup>17</sup> The breeder chooses parents with the finest qualities and rejects the offspring which do not retain the better characteristics. Those offspring which do please the eye for strength, soundness of structure, and beauty are kept and nurtured. Those found lacking are done away with or are used for a lesser purpose. Therefore, it made sense to Spartans that, when trying to

produce the ablest and best army and citizenry, one would be selective in its children.

Although children were permitted to remain with their parents until they reached the age of seven, Spartan leaders expected the parents to begin their children's education at home.<sup>18</sup> Parents punished their children for fear of the dark and cowardice in any situation. Neither did they tolerate whining, pouting, and crying.<sup>19</sup> In this manner, Spartan parents introduced their children to the rigors of life in a military city-state and prepared them to excel in the city's educational system and way of life.

At the age of seven, the boys began to live in barracks with other boys of similar age.<sup>20</sup> Spartan leaders removed the boys from their homes for a specific reason. It kept a boy from being raised by only his father who might tend to overlook his weaknesses and give him preferential and prejudicial treatment. The elders maintained a constant check on the boys living in the barracks to make sure that only the best, noblest, and finest values were encouraged and the baser extravagances and instincts noticed immediately and punished.<sup>21</sup>

There is no concensus among scholars as to the exact groupings of boys and their ages within the groups. H. I. Marrou set forth the most logical and, I believe, the most reasonable suggestion for the age distribution of groups and

their names. Marrou proposed that boys aged eight to eleven made up one group of little boys. He referred to these children as promikkidsomenos (very little boy), mikkidsomenos (little boy), and propais (young adolescent). The second grouping which Marrou termed adolescent consisted of children aged twelve to fifteen. The terms pratopampais or atpotamtais (adolescent) covered the first two years, while for the last two years they were called future ephebes or melleiran. The final grouping consisted of boys aged sixteen to twenty, first called eirens and later proteiras.<sup>22</sup>

The city appointed a Spartan man known for his honesty to oversee the boys and divide them into bands.<sup>23</sup> He also chose a leader or captain from the senior eirens to supervise the bands of younger boys.<sup>24</sup> The captain, called an Iren, must be bold, bright, and quick. The Iren used the younger boys as servants in his home for such duties as gathering wood and salad ingredients.<sup>25</sup> It was in this last endeavor that the youths learned how to steal food from gardens and markets. The overseers deliberately kept the boys' diets sparse in order to motivate and encourage them to steal.<sup>26</sup> In this manner, the boys learned to scavenge for themselves as they would need to during war on enemy territory. As an enticement to crafty stealing, the leaders provided special punishment if the youths were caught.

Either they forced the boys to go without their regular meal or they were "whipped without mercy, for thieving so ill and awkwardly."<sup>27</sup>

Although this forced stealing sounds like rough treatment, the Spartans would not have made conditions so harsh that the growth and well-being of their children, who were their future soldiers, would be jeopardized.

There were different purposes for this strict discipline and harsh training. The primary reason, though, was to teach the young men complete obedience to the state. Taking the children from the parents at such a young age not only weakened family bonds, but substituted family ties for emotional ties with the state. This helped to create a loyal citizen and subject besides promoting the feeling of a brotherhood among the commonwealth.<sup>28</sup>

A second, but lesser reason for the strict training was to root out those youths who were cowardly and those who by their noble characters and courageous actions were natural leaders.<sup>29</sup>

At the age of twelve, the supervisors no longer allowed the boys to wear undergarments. Also, they issued only one cloak per boy for the year.<sup>30</sup> This practice not only kept them from indulging in extravagant luxury, but also from relying upon basic comforts which might not be available in the field during wartime. The boys learned to tolerate the

climate, whether hot or cold, and to be able to function efficiently in either. The supervisors allowed neither oils nor baths, except on rare religious occasions,<sup>31</sup> in order to keep the boys' bodies hard and unused to softness and pampering.

Another Lycurgan reform which had various uses was the daily common meal for all Spartan male citizens. Lycurgus hoped to reduce the effects of wealth and luxurious living by forcing all men, rich and poor, to eat from the same table.<sup>32</sup> However, it also became a tool for teaching.

First, Spartan youths learned their language skills. The elders expected the boys to remain silent unless spoken to by an elder, or when posed a question by the Iren.<sup>33</sup> The elders then desired quick, graceful, witty, and laconic answers. The Iren doled out punishment or reward depending on the worthiness of the answer. The elders then punished or praised the Iren for both the fairness of his question and his estimation of the answer.<sup>34</sup> All present took care that neither the elders nor the Irems used extreme measures.<sup>35</sup>

A second and most significant reason for the boys to eat at the common table was to learn by example of their elders.<sup>36</sup> They observed how to handle jests, questions, and arguments. This training in sententious speech resulted in Spartans becoming famous throughout the ancient world for

their quick wit and tongues. Plutarch gave us an example of this wit with an anecdote. Lycurgus had been asked why he "allowed of such mean and trivial sacrifices to the gods. (Lycurgus) replied, 'That we may always have something to offer to them'"<sup>37</sup> (It is interesting to note that while Spartans trained themselves to have a quick tongue, their actions in times of crisis were often slow and hesitating or delayed by much debate and discussion.)

It was also in these dining clubs that friendships were formed between the older men and the younger.<sup>38</sup> Although some scholars claim the relationships were of a romantic and sexual nature, Marrou contends that it was a matter of the older men taking the younger men's educational interests to heart.<sup>39</sup> As the boy's family was no longer his educational center, another man was necessary to fill the role of educator, spiritual mentor, and emotional supporter.

It is most likely that both associations took place at these all-male gatherings. As there was no social disapproval of homosexuality in Greece,<sup>40</sup> the meals would have offered a natural situation in which these relationships could have formed. Also, the elders had opportunity to observe the strengths and weaknesses of the youths at the meals, and therefore, it is likely that platonic friendships grew from this daily contact between the elders and younger men.

The Spartan youths' education also included gymnastics for two reasons. The exercises and games promoted individual acts of strength, a desire to excel, and competition to spur one another on to greater feats. The other, purely military purpose of the gymnastic exercises prepared the boys for the rigors of war by hardening their bodies. To this end the younger boys engaged in running, swimming, and jumping. The older boys added to their daily exercises wrestling and throwing the discus and spear, and engaged in mock military fights. These sports events took place in an open area called a gymnasium.<sup>41</sup>

To gain honor and prestige among peers and the elders, a man had to have a fit body and some expertise in gymnastics. Therefore, the young men participated in the games and exercises in the nude for two reasons. First, clothing would not hamper the boys and their movements could be freer. Second, in this manner the young men could show off their physical beauty to the elders and other young men.<sup>42</sup> This openness helped inspire pride in their bodies.

Girls, too, trained in a gymnasium. Like the boys, they practiced in the nude and kept to a rigorous exercise schedule. The girls' training ended at an earlier age, though. They were then required to marry, run their households, and bear children.<sup>43</sup>

Instruction in music was as important as the art of conversation in the Spartan educational system. Music teachers instructed their students on such instruments as the lyre, pipe, and harp. Spartan soldiers used the pipe, or flute, as they marched into war giving a rhythm and conformity to the ranks.<sup>44</sup> Professionals and amateurs performed on the lyre and harp at dinner parties for the entertainment of the guests.

Plutarch noted of Spartan music that "their very songs had a life and spirit in them that inflamed and possessed men's minds with an enthusiasm and ardour for action."<sup>45</sup> Although the songs included only the very rudiments of musical theory, their design and form inspired pride in Sparta, her citizens, and in her accomplishments. The lyrics consisted of boasts of future victories, high praises of courage, and rebukes of cowardly acts.<sup>46</sup> The words enthused soldiers for war, combat, and the winning of glory.

Young girls sang these songs of praise or rebuke to the young men at public festivals. Plutarch says of this practice:

Those that were thus commended went away proud, elated, and gratified with their honour among the maidens; and those who were rallied were as sensibly touched with it as if they had been formally reprimanded.<sup>47</sup>

Ideally, these public performances helped to promote a sense of fearlessness and courage in the men during war.



Possibly, they also created a reckless abandon in the soldier during combat. The fear of derision from the Spartan women and before the elders and public may have proven greater than fear of the sword and honorable death.

Male choir performances also took place at these public festivals. Plutarch gives us an example where choirs composed of men, according to age, answer each other in choral form.

The old men began thus:--

"We once were young, and brave, and strong;"

the young men answered them, singing;--

"And we're so now, come on and try;"

the children came last and said:--

"But we'll be strongest by and by."<sup>48</sup>

The average Spartan had little need for reading and writing skills. Lycurgus forbade any laws to be written down, so the youths of each generation memorized them.<sup>49</sup> Instructors taught the young men a minimal amount of reading and writing primarily for the purpose of establishing inventory lists. As men of war, Spartans needed only those skills necessary for carrying out the duties of war.

Only during a Spartan's military service in a war did the leaders relax the strict discipline, and allow comforts. Plutarch tells us that at these times the elders permitted the youths "to curl and adorn their hair, and to have costly

arms and fine clothes."<sup>50</sup> Therefore, it was during a military campaign that Spartan men were the most at ease and cheerful.<sup>51</sup> They could indulge in luxury then as at no other time.

The final education of male Spartan youths involved a custom called crypteia. In this practice a youth murdered one of the hardiest and strongest of the Helots, or male slaves.<sup>52</sup> The Spartans believed that by killing those slaves most able and likely to lead a rebellion, any possible insurrection remained without leadership and the psychological impetus to be carried out.

Scholars disagree about the degree of crypteia and whether it was a formal part of a Spartan youth's education or an occasional occurrence later mistaken for a recognized practice. Some scholars find it difficult to believe that the Spartans were capable of such random, barbarous, and unprovoked killing. Yet, the Spartans held genuine fear of a slave uprising for two reasons. Helots outnumbered Spartan citizens and they had risen before in rebellion. In the year 424 B.C. a mass murder of Helots by the Spartans occurred in order to subdue them.<sup>53</sup> Various sources place death figures from 700 to 2000. If even the smallest estimate is correct, the uprising must have been significant for the Spartans to have felt the need to eliminate such numbers.

Some scholars believe that the Spartan leaders formally declared war upon the Helots each year, so that their murder might be legal.<sup>54</sup> Neither Aristotle nor Xenophon mention this legal measure. Possibly, they either failed to mention it, or they were unfamiliar with it. Neither seems likely, though, given the importance of the action. Humphrey Mitchell suggests that making the Helots' murders legal may have been part of an ancient ritual which had since become meaningless in the passage of time.<sup>55</sup>

Whether or not crypteia was a formal practice and Spartans engaged in it regularly or irregularly, Samuel Williams suggests a possible explanation for it. He proposed that crypteia prepared Spartan youths for war, since once they had murdered a man, they would have less fear, doubt, or reluctance about killing again in a battle situation.<sup>56</sup>

The education of Spartan youths ranged from conversation, music, gymnastics, and military training to murder. Through these means, young boys learned a love for the state, a desire for individual honor and the state's honor, a respect for authority, and complete obedience to the elders who embodied the state.

Spartan leaders reinforced these values by physical punishment, jest and rebuke in public songs sung by the women, constant competition in the exercises and games of

the gymnasium, and by example learned at the common table each day. Although the discipline was often harsh and the demands on the young men were great, the Spartan educational system put forth by Lycurgus was to last down to the fourth century B.C.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Plutarch, Plutarch's Lives, ed. Arthur Hugh Clough, trans. John Dryden, 4 vols. (New York: The Modern Library, 1992), vol. 1, p. 52.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Herodotus, trans. A.D. Godley, 4 vols. (London: William Heinemann), vol. 1, p. 77.

<sup>7</sup>Plutarch, Plutarch's Lives, pp. 59-66.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 65.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 65.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>22</sup>H.I. Marrou, Education in Antiquity, trans. George Lamb (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1956), p. 20.

<sup>23</sup>Plutarch, Plutarch's Lives, p. 68.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., pp. 69-70.

<sup>39</sup>Marrou, Education in Antiquity, p. 30.

<sup>40</sup>K. J. Dover, Greek Homosexuality (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), pp. 60-67.

<sup>41</sup>Kenneth J. Freeman, Schools of Hellas (St. Martin's Street, London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1907), pp. 124-130.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p. 127.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., pp. 29-30.

<sup>44</sup>Plutarch, Plutarch's Lives, p. 73.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., p. 65.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., p. 77.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid.

<sup>54</sup>Humfrey Michell, Sparta (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1952), p. 79.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>56</sup>Samuel G. Williams, The History of Ancient Education (Syracuse, New York: c.W. Bardeen, Publishers, 1903), p. 105-106.

## THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM AT ATHENS

The history of Athenian education may be divided into three general periods. The first, called the old period, lasted until the end of the Persian Wars in 479 B.C. The classical period extended from 479 B.C. to the Macedonian conquest in 338 B.C. And the third, the Hellenistic period continued until the Roman conquest of Hellas in 146 B.C.<sup>1</sup> This chapter will describe schooling within the old period and the ideals and beliefs which governed it. The following chapter will deal with the classical period in which a well-marked change occurred due to the advent of the sophists and philosophy.

As Athens was a democratic city-state, its educational system's purpose focused on creating men able to perform the duties of political office. To this end, Athenian leaders made certain that parents and teachers reared the male children to reflect the values they wished to see in future rulers. Athenian leaders saw no reason for a female's education, as they were not allowed to participate in Athens' political life. Thus, they excluded women in Athens from formal schooling.<sup>2</sup>



The city's leaders organized Athenian education around the belief in the possibility of forming the ideal man. Aristophanes says in the Clouds that the "guiding ideal of this old education was still an ethical one. It can be expressed in one word - kalokagathia - being a man both beautiful and good."<sup>3</sup> Men achieved beauty through vigorous exercise and sport. The Athenian's ideal male body was not only healthy and fit, but the muscles were also well-defined and symmetrical. Beauty also came from within. If a man acted nobly and justly, held to certain principles, and was honest and fair, Athenians considered him good.

After a male completed the required steps in his education, he was expected to perform justly in political office, to be versed in the arts and literature, and to venture into battle willingly and there act bravely. These characteristics also made a man good.

Athenian government intertwined its political purposes with its military strength. Both their leaders and their army must be strong in order to maintain Athens' power. Therefore, Athenian men must be schooled in both leadership skills and in military might. The Greek word which embodies these Athenian goals of a just leadership and a well-disciplined army is arete.<sup>4</sup> It has many meanings, but together they encompass the ideal Athenian man. Arete is manliness, virtue, nobility, achievement, success, virility,

and courage. If Athenian children were taught to have arete, then not only would the city-state have just rulers, but also the Athenian empire would be protected by brave, well-trained soldiers. Hyperides, a former pupil of Plato and a well-known orator, testified to this when he stated that Athenians "educate children so that they may become good men, and they show that they were well educated as children by being especially brave in battle."<sup>5</sup> Unlike the Spartans, the Athenians ranked bravery in war as high in importance as performing political duties well. For ruling well at home made it possible to build an empire, but performing well in battle made it possible to keep that empire.

Educators divided schooling in fifth century B.C. Athens into three separate areas to meet these goals: grammata (grammar), mousike (music), and gymnastike (physical education).<sup>6</sup> Together they served to create the ideal Athenian man.

Grammatists taught reading and writing. Beginning at the age of seven, children learned twenty-four letters and simple to complex sentences. The students practiced their writing on lap boxes covered with wax.<sup>7</sup> Also in grammar studies, they committed to memory literature, particularly The Iliad and The Odyssey.<sup>8</sup> The grammatists believed that making their students memorize Homer's works would instill

in them the noble virtues and magnificent courage found in the epics' heroes.<sup>9</sup> Whether or not it did so, at the least, it provided the children with fine examples of arete.

The grammatists instructed the older boys in advanced written composition, geometry, and rhetoric.<sup>10</sup> Although Athenians considered speaking well essential for future politicians in Athens; unlike the Spartans, they did not require brevity or wit. The teachers did look, however, for fairness, wisdom, and justness in their students' words.

Athenians did not neglect a person's spirit in his education. They believed music was the spirit's tutor which moved men to action, bravery, and courage. Therefore, they made certain that children were instructed in vocal lessons and on various instruments. Music teachers performed on cithers, stringed instruments, and thereby gained the name citharists.<sup>11</sup> Most students learned to play the seven-stringed lyre in the early years, as the cither was a more advanced and professional instrument.<sup>12</sup> Only those who could afford to attend the music school learned to play the lyre,<sup>13</sup> so its usage also became a mark of wealth.

The flute or aulos, a reed instrument, was also common in Athens. David Freeman stated that at "one time the flute became so popular at Athens that the majority of the free citizens could play it."<sup>14</sup> Flutists led soldiers into battle and inspired dances at religious festivals.<sup>15</sup> For

these reasons, Athenians considered the flute an instrument of the passions instead of the mind. This conflicted with their belief in the elevation of the mind over the emotions which may account for the flute's decline in popularity in the latter half of the fifth century B.C.<sup>16</sup> Vases dating from the mid-fifth century B.C. and later portray professional flute girls performing at a dinner party and only very rarely a male guest.<sup>17</sup>

Citharists also instructed children in eurythmic training.<sup>18</sup> Dancing in response to music was essential for participation at religious festivals such as the Heracleia, the Eleusinia, and the Oschophoria where dances formed a significant portion of the celebrations.<sup>19</sup>

Choir masters formed young boys into choirs probably about the age of ten. The boys who sang together as children later fought side by side on the battlefield. Mark Golden suggests that this practice may have been useful in building camaraderie as adult soldiers.<sup>20</sup> Although we cannot take this assumption too far, it is likely that childhood friendships could bring more cohesiveness to a group with a common cause or enemy, such as an army.

A common pasttime for men was to sing while being accompanied by the lyre at Athenian dinner parties. This practice lasted until the Peloponnesian War.<sup>21</sup> Pheidippides in Aristophanes' Clouds proclaimed to his father that

playing the lyre is now out of date.<sup>22</sup> Whether this was a general feeling among Athenians or just a generational difference is difficult to decide. However, the statement does exhibit a change from traditional thinking.

Finally, gymnastike, or athletics, played an important role in Athenian education. Athenians considered a fit body necessary for military action, but they also regarded it as an object of beauty and grace. They believed that a healthy body allowed the mind to perform at its greatest capacity, so it was vital that they nurture and strengthen the physical body. Athenian males obtained their ideal bodies through much exercise and participation in individual and group sports.

The boys and men might take their exercise at two different places. In the larger cities, such as Athens, the town provided a gymnasium at its own expense.<sup>23</sup> Open to the public, any male citizen could use the grounds at any time. The gymnasium usually included bath houses, a stripping room, fields for discus and javelin throwing, a running track, wrestling pits, and gardens.<sup>24</sup> Smaller towns that could not afford the large expense and upkeep of a gymnasium used single yards called palaistras.<sup>25</sup> Supervisors kept these stocked with sand for men and boys' exercise.

The gymnasium in Athens was not only a place of exercise, but also a place to socialize. Conversations

ranged from politics, ethics, and morals to local gossip. Children and young men observed their elders in speech and in action, and so learned how to converse and act appropriately.

The gymnasiarch managed the training grounds where the boys exercised.<sup>26</sup> Paidotribes or boy-rubbers, so named for their job of rubbing the boys' bodies with oil and dust, taught basic exercises.<sup>27</sup> They were responsible for making each boy the best he could be in strength, health, and beauty. Personal trainers or gymnastes instructed the boys in particular sports for upcoming games and competitions.<sup>28</sup> This specialized training was costly, and, typically, it was only the wealthy who could afford to hire a gymnaste. It was not uncommon, though, for younger (or poorer) boys to watch the more accomplished young men in order to gain a better knowledge of a sport, and, in this way, avoid the high fees.<sup>29</sup>

Trainers looked for quick reflexes and self-control in their trainees, but did not overlook gracefulness and agility. Thus, the young boys took part in strength training through lifting weights and throwing balls. Along with those exercises, the older boys also participated in wrestling matches with each other.<sup>30</sup> Trainers expected the athletes to perform skillfully and with ease. Therefore, exercise and practice took place every day in the gymnasium.

Athletic training continued throughout the Athenian men's lives and there were many games and festivals in which they could match their strength against one another. The Olympic Games, the Nemean Games at Argos, the Pythian Games at Delphi, and the Isthmian Games at Corinth are a few examples of such competitions.<sup>31</sup>

Athenians believed that young boys needed the teaching and discipline of many men in order to properly educate them in their city's beliefs, values, and principles. Therefore, a paidagogos, or tutor, accompanied the boy to school. Typically an older man, he was responsible for making certain his charge completed his lessons, took proper exercise, and behaved with propriety.<sup>32</sup>

At the age of fourteen, the boys stopped all but the physical training in order to learn a trade. They served in apprenticeships with potters, cobblers, weavers, tanners, coppers, millers, and other skill masters.<sup>33</sup> Although Mark Golden states that the "stress on discipline and punishment reflects the goal of Athenian schooling, to produce citizens with the hoplite virtues of courage and self-control rather than to teach skills,"<sup>34</sup> most Athenian males were required to learn trade skills to support themselves, their families, and their communities. While the Athenians ultimately desired and needed good soldiers, only the wealthy had no need to learn a trade. The majority of male citizens could

not be full-time soldiers except in the necessity of war. So, while Athenians emphasized military training, their education did not lack basic skill instruction.

Also, I believe that the Athenians did not stress discipline and punishment as much as they stressed courage and self-control. The paidagogos was often treated shamefully by his charge. This ability to disgrace your tutor would instill a certain degree of arrogance, confidence, or feelings of superiority over others in the boys. This pride in themselves grew through the competitions. Pericles stated that Athens is better than Sparta, because they trust in courage whereas Sparta trusts in discipline.<sup>35</sup> He argues, though, that Athens' "unrestricted mode of life"<sup>36</sup> enables them to be more successful. His proof is that while Sparta fights with the aid of its confederates, Athens fights alone and is still victorious. Therefore, courage comes "more from manner of life than compulsion of laws."<sup>37</sup> In other words, true courage can not be forced on a man, but must be instilled in him as a natural characteristic.

Those young men not involved in an apprenticeship spent their time in exercise, hunting, and riding.<sup>38</sup> The cavalry was important to the military, but only a portion of the people could afford to keep a horse for military use. Those



that did, however, learned to ride while carrying shields and lances, and also to throw spears from horseback.<sup>39</sup>

Around the age of eighteen, Athenian boys became ephebi. They then enrolled as members in their fathers' demes in a ceremony of the Ephebic Oath held on the Acropolis.<sup>40</sup> During this ritual, the ephebi spoke a vow of citizenship. For two years after this, the young men took part in military training.<sup>41</sup> Those that had a horse joined the cavalry and those that did not became foot soldiers or sailors. Thus ended the Athenian boys' formal education in the early fifth century B.C.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Richard Hibler, Life and Learning in Ancient Athens (Lanham, Maryland: University of Wisconsin Press, 1956), p. 60.

<sup>2</sup>Kenneth J. Freeman, Schools of Hellas (St. Martin's Street, London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1907), p. 46.

<sup>3</sup>H. I. Marrou, Education in Antiquity, trans. George Lamb (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1956), p. 43.

<sup>4</sup>Hibler, Life and Learning, p. 63.

<sup>5</sup>Mark Golden, Children and Childhood in Classical Athens (Baltimore, Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 1990), p. 64.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>7</sup>Hibler, Life and Learning, p. 62.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>11</sup>Freeman, Schools of Hellas, p. 107.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 110.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 107.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 111.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Hibler, Life and Learning, p. 70.

- <sup>19</sup>Mark Golden, Children and Childhood, p. 69.
- <sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 67.
- <sup>21</sup>Freeman, Schools of Hellas, p. 109.
- <sup>22</sup>Five Comedies of Aristophanes, trans. Benjamin Bickley Rogers, ed. Andrew Chiappe (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1955), pp. 188-191.
- <sup>23</sup>Freeman, Schools of Hellas, p. 124.
- <sup>24</sup>Ibid., pp. 137-141.
- <sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 124.
- <sup>26</sup>Hibler, Life and Learning, p. 26.
- <sup>27</sup>Freeman, Schools of Hellas, p. 126.
- <sup>28</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 142.
- <sup>30</sup>Hibler, Life and Learning, p. 69.
- <sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 25.
- <sup>32</sup>Freeman, Schools of Hellas, pp. 66-69.
- <sup>33</sup>Hibler, Life and Learning, p. 71.
- <sup>34</sup>Golden, Children and Childhood, p. 64.
- <sup>35</sup>Hugh Parry, Ideals of Education: Spartan Warrior and Athenian All-round Man (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1969), p. 15.
- <sup>36</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>37</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>38</sup>Hibler, Life and Learning, p. 72.
- <sup>39</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>40</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>41</sup>Ibid.

## THE CLASSICAL PERIOD OF ATHENIAN EDUCATION

The dates surrounding the classical period of Athenian education are 479 to 338 B.C.<sup>1</sup> During this time Athens prospered and became a commercial power in the Mediterranean. Expanding industry coupled with the growth of maritime strength brought an influx of wealth into the city. The humanities also flourished under these thriving circumstances. Poets, sculptors, architects, philosophers, and playwrights not only increased in numbers, but also matured in ability and talent. Many of the wealthier class patronized these artists which helped to encourage the development of the various arts.<sup>2</sup>

Education, too, underwent a metamorphosis. Although teachers became more numerous, it is the content of what they taught that changed most significantly. This chapter will focus primarily on the rise of the new teachers, their method of teaching, and the content of what they taught.

During the latter half of the fifth and the early fourth century B.C. education in Athens began to turn a corner. The greatest change was the shift from traditional rote learning to learning by discovery and questioning. The

goals of education shifted from creating the ideal man in body, mind, and soul to discovering new ideas about life and how one should live. Teachers and students together re-examined old assumptions about man and his behavior and scrutinized religion and society's traditional beliefs about the gods. They challenged political principles as well as the politicians. Likewise, they rejected the old education and replaced it with a more liberal, searching, and all-encompassing education of the mind. They did not neglect the exercise of the body nor the education of the soul through music, but de-emphasized physical practice and looked at new possibilities for musical composition.

First, a scholar identifies a doubt felt in the heart which then becomes an audible question. If there is no answer, or an answer is not adequate, then the scholar asks more questions. This situation occurred among Athens' young men who now demanded new explanations to their questions. Naturally, they looked to their educators to satisfy their queries. When their teachers' responses did not convince them, the students challenged and attacked the old method of teaching and learning and proposed a fresh approach. They desired a system that would enlarge the existing body of knowledge by adding to it new thoughts and methods. They also wished not only to loosen the reins of tradition, but also to be free to abandon old ideas that no longer made

sense when held up to the grid of their changing world.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, it was the students who opened Athens for a change in education and not the elders of the city.

This new educational system required a different type of teacher. Thus, a new model of teacher came into existence who differed from the old-style teacher in several ways. Men from the older generation considered odd and even offensive by their peers became the first of these new teachers. Whereas the old teachers had taught on approved topics and survived by charitable donations, these new teachers taught for pay, traveled from town to town, and taught everything from rhetoric to the arts to mathematics.<sup>4</sup> Their name, *sophist*, comes from the Greek word *sophia* meaning wisdom.<sup>5</sup> Young men flocked to the sophists and soon the need for additional teachers became evident.

Protagoras, one of the first sophists, if not the first, filled this need by training others to be *sophist* teachers.<sup>6</sup>

Sophists were not usually Athenian, but Athens became "for some sixty years in the second half of the fifth century B.C. {the} real centre of the sophistic movement."<sup>7</sup> This phenomenon occurred for a variety of reasons. G. B. Kerferd believed it was due to the "general situation of Athens and direct encouragement of Pericles."<sup>8</sup> The "general situation" refers to the cosmopolitan character of Athens and the opportunities which that provided for students and

teachers alike. Unlike the Spartans, the Athenians did not discourage foreign teachers from gathering students in their city.

Pericles was the leading statesman of Athens in the fifth century B.C. He also patronized and protected the sophists.<sup>9</sup> Sophists often faced personal injury or imprisonment, because they taught their students to question political, familial, and religious authority. It was, therefore, expedient for them to be connected with a man of influence who could keep them from harm. Two of the more famous sophistic thinkers that Pericles protected were Anaxagoras and Aspasia, an intelligent and wealthy courtesan.<sup>10</sup> Outside of Athens it was more difficult for sophists to speak freely without fear of harassment. Again, this speaks well of Athens' flexibility and openness to new ideas and knowledge.

Athens became the center for sophism for other reasons as well. The city's young men paid highly for the privilege of being a sophist's student. It is believed that Gorgias charged the costliest rates and became very wealthy as a direct result.<sup>11</sup> Other sophists did not charge as much for their services, but still managed to live comfortably.

Sophists did not remain solely in Athens, however, but travelled throughout Greece. Protagoras went to Sicily; Hippias travelled to both Sparta and Sicily; and Gorgias

taught in Argos and Thessaly.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, their influence, as well as their teachings, reached a large section of Greece. Their travels not only served to spread sophistic ideas, but also served to enlarge the sophists' body of knowledge.

Sophistic teaching combined with the growing commerce, the rise of new religious practices, and the presence of many foreigners and their alien ideas created a unique situation for change in Athens. The city was better placed than most Greek towns to see and feel the changes occurring in the world. Naturally, it would take more time for information to filter to the surrounding towns. Possibly, it would also take longer for the new ideas to take root in rural areas where change is often less welcomed or invited.

The sophists were not a cohesive group connected by a single purpose or even a similar educational philosophy.<sup>13</sup> Each sophist had his own particular agenda which determined his method of teaching and the content of his words. Some sophists taught for monetary gain, prestige, as well as for a genuine interest in teaching. As is found in every profession, some taught solely for the money with no interest in helping their students learn and discover. Whatever their motive, they did teach, and they did attract students.



However, all sophists attracted their students by promising to teach them the necessary skills for leading a public life in the political arena. They taught rhetoric, public speaking, and debate.<sup>14</sup> Proficiency in these skills prepared young men for being successful in politics and life as opposed to making them perfect men in all aspects, both morally and physically. While the old education promoted a lifestyle, the education of the classical period helped men pursue a career.<sup>15</sup> As a career in the public life gained in prominence, the students wanted to learn not to gain knowledge, but to gain power. For power and influence were the benefits of the new education which enabled the sophists' students to excel in Athenian politics.

Sophists usually trained their students in small classes or seminars. They used three primary methods to instruct. One of the most common methods, *epideixis*, was a lecture on a set theme.<sup>16</sup> It was popular, because the teacher knew beforehand what he would talk about and could plan his words and the direction he wished the lecture to take. The second method involved discussions between the teacher and students about certain issues, such as why the gods should be worshipped and what kind of crime deserves the punishment of death.<sup>17</sup> This technique produced an atmosphere where skills could be practiced as well as learned. The third method consisted of a dialogue of

questions and answers usually used to teach succinct speaking.<sup>18</sup> In each style the sophists taught their students how to make the weaker argument the stronger in spite of the evidence. It also taught them to anticipate arguments from the opposing side.

We have only summaries of the sophists' beliefs given to us by others and very little that was actually written by them. The information we do have is, of course, wrapped in the writer's own prejudices and beliefs. Plato, for instance, adopted a hostile attitude toward the sophists, particularly over the fact that they required payment for disclosing truth. He, therefore, gives us a jaundiced view of the sophists and their practices.

The sophists' teachings covered a wide range of topics and themes. Students heard lectures on the nature of truth, the substance of justice, knowledge of the gods and how we come by it, the nature and purpose of education, the role of teachers in society, and what it means to live in a democratic city-state.<sup>19</sup> Virtue was another popular topic. Sophists raised the questions of what precisely virtue is, who is qualified to teach virtue, and how it is determined who should be taught virtue.<sup>20</sup>

On a more practical level, the sophists expanded the knowledge of mathematics and trade skills. Aristophanes mentions astronomy in a scene in the Clouds. A student

meets Socrates while he is looking at the constellations from a basket swinging above the ground.<sup>21</sup> Plato also states in the Sophist that the range of topics that the sophists teach include "visible objects on earth and in the sky."<sup>22</sup> Not only does this indicate an interest in the heavens or astronomy, but also a fascination with the physical world and the things of it.

Sophists also included geometry among their subjects. In a discussion of geometry in Plato's Meno, Socrates mentions a diametros, or diagonal. He states that the sophists "called" the crosswise line of a square a diagonal.<sup>23</sup> This word, diametros, is only found twice more and both times are in Aristophanes' Frogs. Quite possibly the term was a new technical word invented by the sophists. At the very least, its usage indicates that geometry was an expanding field of study and that the sophists discovered and solved new geometric problems and questions.

Discussion, lecture, and debate among the sophists and their students also centered on literary works by such poets as Homer, Hesiod, and Simonides. They analyzed the merits of each and argued about the positive and negative qualities of the characters, heroes, and villains. They sought to answer the question of whether or not the heroes should be emulated and if the villains were fairly punished.

In G.B. Kerferd's book The Sophistic Movement, he states that the sophists' teachings underscored two dominant themes. First, sophists teach the "need to accept relativism in values and elsewhere without reducing all to subjectivism."<sup>24</sup> Athenian youths had been taught that truth was an undeniable fact, something one could believe in, or rely on as being indisputable. The sophists now raised the question: could truth be different depending on who looked at it? Could there be different versions of the same truth? Could different people come to believe in opposing truths and each be correct? Students were taught not only to question why they held certain beliefs, but also to ascertain whether or not that belief held up under scrutiny.

The second theme suggested by Kerferd is the "belief that there is no area of human life or of the world as a whole which should be immune from understanding achieved through reasoned argument."<sup>25</sup> This belief made it permissible to question everything. Nothing and no one was sacred. Students rejected anything they could not understand through reason. For example, Greek children learned about the gods and their behavior through the poetic works of Homer and Hesiod. As young men, they began to question why the benevolent gods, held up for emulation, behaved immorally. If the gods were intrinsically good, yet acted maliciously, then the students considered it

reasonable to assume that the gods were not the models of virtue and honor they had been raised to revere. Therefore, if the gods were not good examples of moral behavior, then they were not really gods at all, but merely humans with some exceptional or exaggerated qualities. This line of reasoning led the students to the conclusion that these characters were not worthy of worship or the reverence due to gods.

Sophists themselves became the subject of debate both in ancient times and in the present. While students flocked to hear their teachings, Athenian elders denounced the sophists by saying they stole the hearts of the young men away from tradition, away from the gymnasia, and away from respect for the city-state or any kind of authority.

Scholars in this present day have argued as to the sophists' influence and what they represented. A primary theory concluded that the sophists showed a "turning away from physical speculation to something new."<sup>26</sup> I believe it is more likely that physical speculation was not lost, but was de-emphasized while newer subjects became predominant in the sophists' teachings. The sophists expanded Athenian education; they did not exchange it for something else.

Henry Sidgwick gives an older view of the sophists in his article published in the Journal of Philology in 1872.<sup>27</sup> He states that sophists were a "set of charlatans" who only

"professed to teach virtue."<sup>28</sup> Sidgwick really believes they "taught the art of fallacious discourse, and meanwhile propagated immoral practical doctrines,"<sup>29</sup> such as disrespect of authority. He praises Socrates for exposing the sophists' true characters, so that they eventually "fell into well-merited contempt."<sup>30</sup> This opinion seems harsh yet understandable when one recognizes that Sidgwick wrote at a time when his own world was changing due to the introduction of new ideas and questions about authority.

However, Sidgwick was not alone in his opinion. Both ancient and recent scholars berated the sophists for their encouragement to question traditional beliefs, for their lack of original thinking, and for merely teaching their students to argue whether or not what they argued was correct or proper.<sup>31</sup>

Sophists did provide an education for those young men wishing to spend their lives in the political and public arena. They taught students to think, to question, to probe, and to seek true answers. They also taught practical skills which the young men could use to influence people. The ability to influence meant they could gain more power and prestige. Influence, power, and prestige all added up to success and wealth. It is no wonder that many young Athenian men flocked to the sophists who claimed to give them the key to all of it.

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Richard Hibler, Life and Learning in Ancient Athens (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, Inc., 1988), p. 60.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>G. B. Kerferd, The Sophistic Movement (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 1-2.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Plutarch, Plutarch's Lives, ed. Arthur Hugh Clough, trans. John Dryden, four vols. (New York: The Modern Library, 1992), p. 228.

<sup>11</sup>Kenneth J. Freeman, Schools of Hellas (St. Martin's Street, London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1907), p. 169.

<sup>12</sup>Kerferd, The Sophistic Movement, p. 23.

<sup>13</sup>Robin Barrow, Plato and Education (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976), p. 13.

<sup>14</sup>Kerferd, The Sophistic Movement, p. 17

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Five Comedies of Aristophanes, trans. Benjamin Bickley Rogers, ed. Andrew Chiappe (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1955), p. 160.

<sup>22</sup> Plato, Sophist, trans. H. N. Fowler (London: William Heinemann, 1921), p. 321.

<sup>23</sup> Kerferd, The Sophistic Movement, p. 39.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Hibler, Life and Learning, p. 79.



## SOPHISTS OF THE CLASSICAL PERIOD

Scholars are aware of about twenty-six sophists who were active during the classical period of Athenian education.<sup>1</sup> The sophists' popularity reached its height between the years 460 to 380 B.C. During this time, changes took place in Athens' educational system. For instance, some teachers introduced drawing as a new subject.<sup>2</sup> Geometry, while taught before, now became a recognized branch of education.<sup>3</sup> Cultivation of the voice grew in value, so students practiced reading aloud more often.<sup>4</sup> Most significantly, military spirit declined throughout Athens. As a reflection of this trend, Athenian leaders reduced the required time of military service for young men from two years to one year.<sup>5</sup> In this chapter, I will describe some of the sophists about whom we know the most.

### Protagoras

Protagoras lived between 490 and 421 B.C. Born in Abdera, he was often a visitor to Athens where he befriended Pericles. He was the first that we are aware of to call

himself a sophist.<sup>6</sup> Due to the persecution of these new teachers, he stated that he felt it was safer to admit his occupation than to hide it. From the fifth century B.C. onwards, the name sophist had applied to poets, musicians, seers, diviners, and rhapsodes.<sup>7</sup> G.B. Kerferd said it referred to "all of whom were seen as revealing visions of knowledge not granted otherwise to mortals."<sup>8</sup> Therefore, he suggested that Protagoras wished to align himself with Greece's most accomplished and famous men by naming himself a sophist.<sup>9</sup> However, the Greeks did not usually disapprove of or attempt to harm their creative or spiritual figures as they did sophist teachers. Therefore, if Kerferd is correct, then Protagoras was naive to believe that his philosophy of questioning the governing authorities and the gods whoms Greeks revered would grant him the same admiration as those who respected and praised their virtues.

Protagoras' association with Pericles appears to have opened doors for him. He wrote the constitution for a new colony at Thurii.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, he must have been not only well-known enough to be chosen for such a job, but also have had the skills with which to meet the demand successfully.

Diogenes Laertius composed a list of Protagoras' works, none of which are extant. Included on the list are the Art of Eristics, On Wrestling, On Virtues, On Those in Hades. On Government, and On Sciences.<sup>11</sup> As we can discern from the

titles, Protagoras interested himself in a variety of subjects, including grammar, sports, politics, morals, and religion. His critics accused him of relativism. They also disliked his idea that nomos (law) controlled human institutions instead of physis (nature).<sup>12</sup>

Although we have little direct knowledge of Protagoras' beliefs, we may assume his ideas were radical enough for the time to provoke charges of impiety against him. Once convicted, the authorities burned Protagoras' books.<sup>13</sup> Tradition then maintains that Protagoras left Athens and drowned while on a sea voyage,<sup>14</sup> possibly escaping a death penalty or travelling into exile.

### Gorgias

Born around 485 B.C. in Leontini in Sicily, Gorgias lived into the fourth century B.C. Very little is known for certain about his life. Tradition says that he studied under the Sicilian philosopher Empedocles and led an assembly from Leontini to Athens in 427 B.C.<sup>15</sup> He attempted to convince the Athenians to ally with Leontini against Syracuse. Pausanias reported that the Athenians held Gorgias in high esteem in Athens,<sup>16</sup> possibly due to his admired speeches on behalf of Leontini.

We also know he wrote On Nature in the 84th Olympiad (444-441 B.C.).<sup>17</sup> Gorgias is remembered most, perhaps, for

his proof that nothing exists, if something did exist we could not understand it, and if we could, we could not communicate it.<sup>18</sup> Whether he sincerely believed this idea, or was simply having fun will remain a mystery.

He taught privately and gave epideictic speeches, lectures on a predetermined theme, at Olympia, Delphi, Thessaly, Boeotia, and Argos. Like Protagoras, he charged fees, but unlike most other sophists, Gorgias became extremely wealthy which speaks well of his reputation.<sup>19</sup>

### Antiphon

Scholars question whether or not there were two Antiphons: one a sophist, one of Rhamnus. No distinction was made until the first century B.C. when Didymus of Alexandria brought attention to the differences in genre between the written works.<sup>20</sup> As this was the only time the Antiphons were separated, the majority of scholars believe only one Antiphon existed. However, their problem lies in that the political views attributed to Antiphon are on opposing sides. This fact may be discounted by the explanation that they are views of the same person at different points in his life.

They or he lived about 470 to 411 B.C. Antiphon the Sophist studied physical and astronomical perplexities and attempted to square the circle by a method of exhaustion.<sup>21</sup>

His works include On Truth, Politicus, On Concord, and On the Interpretation of Dreams.<sup>22</sup>

Thucydides explains that Antiphon of Rhamnus was a member of the oligarchic Four Hundred.<sup>23</sup> They took control of Athens for four months in 411 B.C. Antiphon and others were executed when the oligarchic government was overthrown. It is believed that Antiphon of Rhamnus wrote tragedies, manuals of rhetoric, and the Techne Alupias or Art of avoiding distress.<sup>24</sup>

One or the same Antiphon also composed the Tetralogies or speeches for both sides of a murder trial.<sup>25</sup> Characteristically of sophists, he taught his students to win an argument in spite of which side they represented.

### Socrates

An Athenian by birth, Socrates lived from 470 to 399 B.C. He spent his life questioning and teaching. Scholars have disagreed both during his lifetime and in the present, whether or not Socrates was a sophist. Xenophon argued that Socrates did not talk about the most common sophist topics: nature of the universe, how the cosmos arose, or laws governing the earth.<sup>26</sup> Some scholars also point out that Socrates charged no fees for his teaching.

I believe Socrates should be included among the sophists for three reasons. He did talk about the manner by

which men govern, human behavior, and religion and religious authority - topics common to other sophists. Also it seems clear that his contemporaries viewed him as a sophist. For example, Aristophanes made sport of him as a sophist in his Clouds.<sup>27</sup> And, although he received no payment,<sup>28</sup> this fact alone does not exclude him from the sophists.

Socrates emphasized the "moral aspect of education, development of personality, and the inner life."<sup>29</sup> His view of education was utilitarian in that his methods dealt with the conduct and character of the individual, not his popularity.<sup>30</sup> He drew facts out of the daily lives of people, thereby adapting his topics to fit his particular audience. By advancing from the specific to the general in his arguments, he insured the proof would be clear to the listener. He intended to prove that learning is drawing out the things we already know. For example, Socrates showed a slave boy that he knew geometrical principles even if he did not understand the concepts behind them.<sup>31</sup> Through his methods, Socrates tried to prepare his students to think reasonably and logically, thus allowing them to make good and right decisions and choices in life.

Despite his many followers, Socrates had also made many enemies. Charged and convicted for introducing new deities into the city and corrupting the young, authorities sentenced Socrates to die by drinking hemlock.<sup>32</sup>

### Prodicus

Born before 460 B.C. on the island of Ceos, Prodicus was still alive at Socrates' death in 399 B.C. He travelled and taught both privately and in open lecture. He wrote on the subjects of Hours and On the Nature of Man, but he is best known for his work on language.<sup>33</sup> Socrates often sent students to Prodicus to gain in wisdom and philosophical thought.<sup>34</sup> We may ascertain from this fact that Socrates and probably others thought highly of Prodicus in his lifetime.

### Isocrates

An Athenian who lived approximately 436 to 338 B.C., Isocrates believed young men saw education only as a means to personal achievement and wealth.<sup>35</sup> It angered him that they cared more for themselves than for their city. Therefore, he founded his own school where he prepared his students for the duties of public life by educating their minds and characters instead of giving them prepared material to memorize.<sup>36</sup>

Isocrates' school was different from the other major schools in two ways. First, he paid less attention to form. Second, he taught less technical knowledge, less scientifically, and used less speculation.<sup>37</sup> He considered

subjects, such as math and the sciences, only preparatory courses in a young man's educational endeavor.<sup>38</sup>

He stated that geometry and astronomy should be studied for two reasons. First, they caused the students to learn to apply their minds to a problem. Second, they helped students gain the power to grasp things more quickly and easily. Once ease in simple matters had been accomplished, they could move on to larger and more complex problems.<sup>39</sup>

Isocrates maintained that speaking should be at the heart of education. He stated that Athenians rise above all others due to the "fact that you have been educated as have been no other people in wisdom and in speech."<sup>40</sup> He believed that rhetoric educated the taste, judgment, and character of an individual and, therefore, should be concerned with morals.<sup>41</sup>

Isocrates, too, defended himself in court against the charge of being a sophist. He was 82 years old.<sup>42</sup> We do not know whether he was convicted, nor if his death was natural.

Included among Isocrates' surviving works is Against the Sophists, a diatribe about the men who call themselves sophists, but pervert the teachings. Isocrates also wrote the Antidosis, a discourse in which he defends the practices of his profession - a sophist.



According to John Walden, Isocrates prepared students for "active life in the service of the state on the basis of the perfect development of the individual."<sup>43</sup> He considered this one of the "important services which Isocrates rendered to the cause of education."<sup>44</sup>

### Thrasymachus

We encounter this sophist speaking to Socrates in Plato's Republic.<sup>45</sup> He was well-known as an orator and teacher of rhetoric in Athens about 427 B.C. and therefore, was able to travel much and charge fees for his lectures like other sophists. We do know he made a speech On Behalf of the people of Larissa.<sup>46</sup> Nothing else is known of his life.

### Euthydemus and Dionysodorus

These two brothers originated from Chios, a small Greek island. They joined the colony of Thurii, but later were exiled to the Greek mainland. Their existence is considered certain, as both Xenophon and Aristotle mentioned them in their works. Evidently, they met and talked with Socrates about 420 B.C.<sup>47</sup>

Callicles

Reputedly from Archarnae in Attica, Callicles' existence has been doubted, as his name is found only in Plato's Gorgias.<sup>48</sup> Most scholars, however, do believe he existed because of Socrates' thorough description of him.

Socrates gives a few insights into Callicles' methods. He preferred teaching rhetoric to virtue; he did not think that philosophy was a worthy subject to be pursued as an adult; and, he rejected traditions and laws because they were arbitrary. Kerferd called Callicles "a very important figure in the history of the sophistic movement" because of Callicles' arguments for a life of action and success.<sup>49</sup>

Hippias

Like Callicles, we cannot ascribe particular birth or death dates for Hippias. Again, Socrates' familiarity with him allows us to deduce that he most likely lived during the early fourth century B.C. Typical of the sophists, Hippias travelled extensively and amassed a sizable amount of money.<sup>50</sup> He is noted by scholars for four reasons.

First, according to Socrates, Hippias was a polymath.<sup>51</sup> He taught not only the usual subjects of mathematics, astronomy, geometry, painting, and sculpture, but also included genealogy, history, mythology, grammar, and music.

Particularly noted for his excellent memory, he became famous for the memory techniques he taught others.<sup>52</sup>

Second, Hippias is credited with a list of Olympic victors which Thucydides probably used to establish a basic chronology for Greek history.<sup>53</sup> Third, Hippias discovered and named the curve used for the dissection of an angle. He called it a quadratix.<sup>54</sup>

Finally, Hippias put together Synagoge: a collection of stories, information, and quotes about the history of religion and other subjects. According to Bruno Snell in a 1946 article, this was evidence that Hippias was the first systematic doxographer.<sup>55</sup>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>G. B. Kerferd, The Sophistic Movement (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 42.

<sup>2</sup>John H. Walden, PhD., Universities of Ancient Greece (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909), p. 22.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>6</sup>Plato, Protagoras, trans. C. C. W. Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), p. 9.

<sup>7</sup>Kerferd, The Sophistic Movement, p. 24.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>11</sup>Diogenes Laertius, Lives of Eminent Philosophers, trans. R. D. Hicks, 2 vols. (London: William Heinemann, 1925), vol. 2, p. 467.

<sup>12</sup>Greece and the Hellenistic World, eds. John Boardman, Jasper Griffin, Oswyn Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 230.

<sup>13</sup>Kerferd, The Sophistic Movement, p. 42.

<sup>14</sup>Laertius, Lives, p. 469.

<sup>15</sup>Kerferd, The Sophistic Movement, p. 44.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>18</sup>Greece, p. 116.

- <sup>19</sup>Kerferd, The Sophistic Movement, p. 45.
- <sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 50.
- <sup>21</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>22</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 51.
- <sup>24</sup>Ibid.
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- <sup>26</sup>Xenophon, Anabasis and the Memorabilia of Socrates, trans. Rev. J. S. Watson (London: George Bell and Sons, 1907), p. 352.
- <sup>27</sup>Five Comedies of Aristophanes, trans. Benjamin Bickley Rogers, ed. Andrew Chiappe (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1955), pp. 160-172.
- <sup>28</sup>Kerferd, The Sophistic Movement, p. 52.
- <sup>29</sup>H. I Marrou, Education in Antiquity, trans. George Lamb (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1956), p. 62.
- <sup>30</sup>Greece, p. 231.
- <sup>31</sup>Jerome Eckstein, The Platonic Method (New York: Greenwood Publishing Corporation, 1968), pp. 111-116.
- <sup>32</sup>Kenneth J. Freeman, Schools of Hellas (St. Martin's Street, London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1907), p. 277.
- <sup>33</sup>Kerferd, The Sophistic Movement, p. 46.
- <sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 45-46.
- <sup>35</sup>Hugh Parry, Ideals of Education: Spartan Warrior and Athenian All-round Man (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1967), p. 24.
- <sup>36</sup>Kerferd, The Sophistic Movement, p. 24.
- <sup>37</sup>Walden, Universities of Ancient Greece, p. 33.
- <sup>38</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>39</sup>Kerferd, The Sophistic Movement, p. 24.

- <sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 26.
- <sup>41</sup>Walden, Universities of Ancient Greece, p. 32.
- <sup>42</sup>Parry, Ideals of Education, p. 24.
- <sup>43</sup>Walden, Universities of Ancient Greece, p. 33.
- <sup>44</sup>Ibid., p. 34.
- <sup>45</sup>Plato, Republic, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 3-43.
- <sup>46</sup>Kerferd, The Sophistic Movement, p. 51.
- <sup>47</sup>Ibid., p. 53.
- <sup>48</sup>Ibid., p. 52.
- <sup>49</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>50</sup>Ibid., p. 46.
- <sup>51</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>52</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>53</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>54</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>55</sup>Ibid., p. 48.

## PLATO AND ARISTOTLE'S IDEAL EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS

Plato and Aristotle proposed more profound changes in the educational methods and purposes than the sophists. Due to Plato's activity during the peak years of the sophist movement and Aristotle's at its decline, the sophists and their teachings influenced both men. However, they went a few steps further than the sophists. Plato took education into the realm of philosophy, while Aristotle, on the other hand, took education in a scientific direction. Both recorded their ideal education and methods. Plato's educational system created a few men capable of rational leadership, while Aristotle's educational system attempted to make all men responsible statesmen.

### Plato

An Athenian of the aristocratic class, Plato lived between 427 and 347 B.C. He founded a school called the Academy in 387 B.C., which survived Greece's social and political upheavals at the end of the third century until

the Roman emperor Justinian ordered the Academy closed in 529 A.D.<sup>1</sup>

Plato wrote prolifically, and many of his works have survived to the present day. Plato discussed his ideas on education primarily in the Republic.

H. I. Marrou stated that "Plato built his system of education on a fundamental belief in truth, and on the conquest of truth by rational knowledge."<sup>2</sup> Plato believed not only that truth existed, but that it also may be known and recognized. Enlarging upon this idea, Plato also surmised that it would be possible not only to learn and teach known truth, but also possible to teach a feasible method to gain more truth, previously unknown.

Concerned about the incompetence and corruption which he witnessed in the democracy during the Peloponnesian War, Plato stressed, as essential, the building of a child's character from the very earliest years.<sup>3</sup> He maintained that good men became better men if their nurture and education continued in a consistent manner.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, Plato built his educational scheme around the necessity of creating men to be of such a mind and character that they desired to know truth and to learn more truth.

Plato established within his ideal educational system the requirements for a school and a society that would make men capable of leading the city-state well. With these



goals in mind, Plato began forming his educational scheme described in the Republic by deciding what may and may not be part of the curriculum that would create teachable men. He believed that once these men knew the truth, they would lead rational lives, serving the state justly and honestly in public office. They could continue serving rationally, because they had learned how to discern the truth in matters of justice. These men he called philosopher-kings.<sup>5</sup> As their name implies, they would be rulers who were also thinkers. Plato believed a reformed education was the only way to produce the change in society that he believed was necessary for Athens' survival.<sup>6</sup>

However, Plato did not approve of innovation. He felt the state must guard against change because it was corrupt in itself. Thus, Plato extended his educational scheme to restrict even children's pastimes.<sup>7</sup> He believed their play and games must be kept within certain boundaries and limitations. If unsupervised, the children may alter the rules of a game or make up a new game altogether. If this innovation was left unchecked, the children who initiated change in play, may grow to be adult innovators in more important matters, such as state policy, justice, or education. Plato claimed these innovators would "cause disrespect for old ways."<sup>8</sup> It is curious that Plato, afraid of innovation, advocated a dramatic change in education, for

the express purpose of promoting change in the social and political structure. Perhaps Plato's upbringing in the aristocratic class hampered him here, for he had difficulty accepting that there might be those with ideas for reform that did not agree with him and that this in itself did not immediately invalidate their proposals. Plato also fails to realize that without innovation or change Athens would fail to meet the continuing test of time and altering circumstances.

Plato's education began with boys and girls under the age of ten. They participated in physical exercises, including gymnastics, or wrestling and dancing.<sup>9</sup> Plato saw no need to teach boxing, as it was useless in war.<sup>10</sup> After the age of ten, he added cultural training in the form of musical instruction. However, Plato's educational scheme did stress mathematics, because it "awakened the mind, developed its speed and liveliness and its memorizing powers."<sup>11</sup> Plato's physical education also included archery practice and military procedures.<sup>12</sup> Each child's performance and skill determined his class advancement.

Plato created the position of a law-warden/educator to be in charge of the children.<sup>13</sup> As too broad a range of learning would be dangerous for the children, the law-warden supervised not only the children's activities, but also the teachings of the writing and lyre instructors.<sup>14</sup>

Plato believed children could be led astray through music and literature to harmful paths of learning.<sup>15</sup> For example, Plato chose to allow only poetic literature, particularly Homer, into his educational system.<sup>16</sup> He limited these, though, to only certain passages which praised either the gods or good men. Plato feared that exposure to any literature other than that which promoted the best qualities of men could lead to a lack of sense or strong emotion. Plato wished to turn everything into a "focus for Good,"<sup>17</sup> and he believed that too much emotion would be destructive and corruptive. Likewise, he limited music to that which produced good or helpful emotions in men and not those which sounded sad or unnecessarily gay.

In a later work, Plato stated that one should learn everything possible about the gods in order not to offend them nor blaspheme against them.<sup>18</sup> This presented him with difficulties, though. The gods in Greek literature had shortcomings and flaws, often acting in disgraceful ways. Yet, if students could only read about the good qualities and actions of the gods, then they would not know everything about them.

By defining and limiting the students' access to particular types of literature, music, and exercise, Plato hoped to produce near-perfect men fully in control of themselves and desiring to perform their best, physically

and mentally, for the state. Unfortunately, he would also be producing men limited in understanding and depth.

In the Republic, Plato spoke of an education for a majority, but only demonstrated an educational scheme for the wealthy.<sup>19</sup> Plato did not intend a society built on an aristocratic class, however. He overlooked in the Republic the fact that very few could afford his education. He realized this problem later and in his book the Laws, Plato expanded his education to be compulsory and universal.<sup>20</sup> In this manner, he protected his educational system from being exclusive and out-of-reach. Also, he made the state more responsible for the education of its citizens.

Plato also advocated the identical education for men as well as for women. In chapter seven of the Republic, he puts forth the argument that while women may be the physically weaker sex and therefore, men can do more than they can, women should share in the responsibilities and concerns of the community.<sup>21</sup> He states that women are capable of not just childbearing, but also taking on leadership roles as guardians in the city-state.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, they must have the same education the men receive if they are expected to perform as well as men. He bases this proposal on his belief that "innate qualities have been distributed equally between the two sexes, and women can join in every occupation just as much as men."<sup>23</sup>

Aristotle

A native of Illyria in northern Greece, Aristotle lived between 384 and 322 B.C. He studied under Plato for twenty years and eventually founded his own school, the Lyceum.<sup>24</sup>

Aristotle believed education's primary goal was a citizen's preparation for democracy. His education would "develop a man's mental capacities to the fullest extent"<sup>25</sup> for the purpose of serving the city-state. He believed that men should willingly devote themselves to the good of the city-state which would, therefore, ensure the good of the individual. This willingness would only evolve through proper education.

Aristotle pursued another goal in education which was bound up with the first. The city-state succeeded when its citizens served it well by leading a pure and noble life. He presumed that men could only learn to live well and justly through proper education.<sup>26</sup>

Aristotle theorized that the state was responsible to undertake the public's education, since all citizens belonged to the state. He praised Sparta for its assumption of public education.<sup>27</sup>

As all citizens serve in a democracy, Aristotle intended that all citizens should be prepared to serve. Thus, he did not exclude women in his educational scheme. He maintained that women were important as they not only

reared the children, but they also made up half of Athens' population.<sup>28</sup> In the event of war or a natural catastrophe, women needed to be prepared to fill the positions left vacant by men. This could only occur if the women had been adequately educated before the event.

In Aristotle's ideal educational scheme, children remained at home until the age of seven, after which they joined other children at the school for gymnastics, literary arts, and music.<sup>29</sup> He also included reading, writing, and drawing. Although the historians Thucydides and Herodotus had lived and produced sizable Greek histories a few years prior to this time, there is no mention of history as a subject in Aristotle's school. Neither does Aristotle mention dialectics which was a topic common to Socrates and the sophists.<sup>30</sup> Aristotle dedicated the Lyceum, instead, to scientific research.

Like Plato, Aristotle accorded music a significant role in education. He credited music with the ability to inspire men to live a noble life.<sup>31</sup> As music drew out a great range of emotions from people, he also held it was a good way to train a man to control his emotions. Finally, musical instruction in singing and playing an instrument also produced good critics of music.

In music, as in other areas of life, Aristotle espoused moderation in accomplishment.<sup>32</sup> It is here that Aristotle

differentiates between freemen and slaves. A freeman could pursue knowledge of any employment, but should not engage in it to excess. Aristotle considered a freeman illiberal, if he worked for mere profit, or worked mechanically, without interest. He must work for the work's own sake, for his friends' sake, or for virtue.<sup>33</sup>

Aristotle shaped his teaching methods around a belief in three characters of man: nature, habit, and reason.<sup>34</sup> Aristotle defined nature as the innate abilities found in each person. Habit included anything that could be taught until it was ingrained by the force of repetition. Reason referred to the thinking power of the brain.

Aristotle also believed in three boundaries of education: moderation, possibility, and decency.<sup>35</sup> Moderation limited education, because he felt, as noted above, that freemen should not excel in anything other than democracy and living the noble life. Being too accomplished in some area may lead a man to vanity, selfish ambition, or wrongful desires. Therefore, in the instance of art or music, the freeman should know enough to be a good judge of another's work, but not so good that he would engage in art or music for the praise of others.

Possibility referred to the acknowledgment that some things previously learned were not, in fact, the truth. As more knowledge was discovered or understood, it generated

more questions. Aristotle realized that their present knowledge was imperfect, but also knew that only in working from supposed truth could he and others branch out in other directions.

Finally, Aristotle limited education to standards of decency. Freemen must be distinguished from slaves in some manner and decency was that method.<sup>36</sup>

Aristotle attempted to create an ideal state by making the men within the state ideal. He fused individual interests with social concerns. Therefore, Aristotle believed education should be "regarded as an affair of the entire community,"<sup>37</sup> but did not include non-freemen in his term community.

F. P. Graves concluded that Aristotle's "partial bondage to his times and his lack of imagination" were responsible for his "defense of slavery and insistence upon the inferiority of barbarians," and "the disfranchisement and lack of education for the industrial classes."<sup>38</sup> In other words, Aristotle did not recognize or refused to acknowledge the changing world around him. He attempted to create the ideal world based on what had worked in the past without taking into account the differences in his present day and possible changes in the future.



## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Hugh Parry, Ideals of Education: Spartan Warrior and Athenian All-round Man (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1969), p. 25.

<sup>2</sup>Henri I. Marrou, Education in Antiquity, trans. George Lamb (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1956), p. 66.

<sup>3</sup>Parry, Ideals of Education, p. 24.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>5</sup>Plato, Republic, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), chp. 8.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., chps. 4 and 10.

<sup>7</sup>Parry, Ideals of Education, pp. 26-27.

<sup>8</sup>Plato, Laws, trans. R. G. Bury, Litt.D. (London: William Heinemann, 1926), vol. 2, p. 33.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>11</sup>Marrou, Education in Antiquity, p. 73.

<sup>12</sup>Plato, Laws, p. 87.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Parry, Ideals of Education, p. 27.

<sup>17</sup>Robin Barrow, Plato and Education (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976), p. 40.

<sup>18</sup>Plato, Laws, p. 113.

- <sup>19</sup>Barrow, Plato and Education, p. 18.
- <sup>20</sup>Samuel G. Williams, The History of Ancient Education (Syracuse, NY: C. W. Bardeen, Publishers, 1903), p. 169.
- <sup>21</sup>Plato, Republic, pp. 162-163.
- <sup>22</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 167.
- <sup>24</sup>Parry, Ideals of Education, p. 29.
- <sup>25</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>26</sup>Williams, Ancient Education, p. 180.
- <sup>27</sup>Parry, Ideals of Education, p. 29.
- <sup>28</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>29</sup>Williams, Ancient Education, pp. 7-21.
- <sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 184.
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- <sup>32</sup>Aristotle, Natural Science, The Metaphysics, Zoology, Psychology, The Nicomachean Ethics, On Statecraft, The Art of Poetry, trans. Philip Wheelwright (New York: Odyssey Press, 1935), pp. 285-286.
- <sup>33</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>34</sup>Williams, Ancient Education, p. 178.
- <sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 184.
- <sup>36</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>37</sup>Aristotle, Natural Science, p. 285.
- <sup>38</sup>Graves, A History of Education, pp. 210-211.

SPARTA AND ATHENS: TWO PERSPECTIVES  
ON EDUCATION

Sparta

Sparta developed her potential in resources, trade, and commerce until she reached her peak in 550 B.C.<sup>1</sup> She then tried to maintain her peak by keeping things in a static condition.<sup>2</sup> It is not an uncommon mistake. The leaders and people of Sparta believed that they could maintain their peak in military and commercial power by a rigid adherence to the means in which they had attained that power - means which they now viewed as traditional.

Generational differences may account for many of the problems Sparta faced. The grandfathers and fathers built Sparta. So, naturally, they believed they knew the best way to make her citizens wealthy, the city famous, and its military the best in the Grecian world. The sons grew up in affluence, knowing both power and pride. Yet, as no system or government is perfect, they could also see the faults of the system and the errors made by their forefathers. They did not ask questions in order to disrespect the things their fathers and grandfathers had accomplished, but they

saw ways in which to make their lives and Sparta even better and more advanced.

I am not suggesting that the divisive lines were solely based on age and generation. There were, of course, older men who saw the need to change with changing events in the world. However, they were the minority and could only warn the others of the effects of trying to stay the same. Tradition can be a tremendous power. It can unite various people for the same cause. It can remind people of what came before, where they came from, and the sacrifices that others made to get them there. Yet, it can also become a stagnating power. One that freezes people in time and place if they think they have grown as much as is necessary. It can also keep people from action and leave them in their comfort zones.

Sparta's older generation desired to rest in the prosperity for which it had fought and worked so long and hard. They did not want Sparta to change while they still lived, but wished to enjoy its benefits for a time.<sup>3</sup> The younger men rebelled against the inaction and stagnation. They had nothing invested in the present manner of things and desired change. Their elders' traditions were not sacred to them as they had not helped to fashion it.

As stated in the first chapter, Spartan education centered on unquestioning obedience to authority, courage in

the rigors of war, and perfect control of the body and mind.<sup>4</sup> They incorporated these beliefs into their educational system. The older generation who held to these tenets had seen the process by which they had been developed. They understood the reasoning behind them and what Sparta would be like without them. It is not unusual, however, for those who have not made the rules to question their validity. Complete obedience to a system which they viewed as flawed despite its benefits seemed unreasonable to the youths. Thus, they began to question authority.<sup>5</sup>

The youths had a stake in acting courageously in war, as they had little desire to receive jokes and taunts from family and friends at home, or to be killed. Yet, they did not feel the strict discipline and conditions they endured during peacetime was warranted. Spartans, like the Athenians, could fight for love of country and for pride. The youths did not see the need to train in order to believe in the cause for which they fought.

Finally, the Spartan young men were not as willing to maintain an expanding empire as the elder generation would have desired. By focusing on purely military training, they left the young men ill-equipped to carry out the functions of ruling vast areas of land and different peoples. They did not teach them the finer points of diplomacy and of

administration that would have enabled Sparta's youth to rule as well as they fought.

In this manner, the elder generation, who insisted on maintaining tradition as they saw it and on discouraging change, not only stopped Sparta's progress, but also assisted in its decline. They kept Sparta from attaining the necessary elements needed for growth and stability, that is, knowledge and understanding. They gave the young men no opportunity to test their own assumptions or beliefs, but imposed upon them the requirements for maintaining their own way of life. The younger generation rebelled when they witnessed the mistakes and faults of the old system. That rebellion grew in force, because they were not allowed to express it.

The Spartans believed that the needs of the state came before the needs or wants of the individual. Yet, the younger generation of Spartan males (and females) witnessed the greed and corruption of their elders and the manner in which it was ignored or excused. To witness that the grand principles of Sparta's systems did not match the actual deeds of their leaders could only have frustrated the young men even more.<sup>6</sup>

The Lycurgan reforms had been much needed and welcomed. However, they did have an aura of inflexibility about them, as they did not take into account human nature. For

example, although Lycurgus tried to eliminate the effects of wealth by requiring all men to eat at a common table, it was more difficult to eliminate greed.<sup>7</sup> Men continued to seek personal gain.

Another error the Spartans made was to focus all their attention and resources on military might.<sup>8</sup> They did not see, or refused to recognize, that in their changing world military strength was taking second place to commercial power. A less powerful nation could make its presence felt if it maintained control of a few well-positioned and well-guarded ports. In this way they controlled who came in, who went out, and thus, controlled who received which goods. Therefore, Sparta's insistence upon training children for soldiery from birth stunted their ability to grow in other directions. Sparta's leaders made the error of believing that they were invincible as long as they had the best army without attempting to rule by sea.<sup>9</sup>

Sparta's problems and decline also stemmed from the fact that their population was diminishing in size.<sup>10</sup> Spartan generals found it necessary to hire mercenaries and use slaves in their armies. These hired soldiers, or those under duress, did not, of course, fight with the same amount of enthusiasm that true Spartan citizens did. The different classes of soldiers altered the dynamics of unity and

discipline, which dampened the effectiveness of the Spartan fighting units.

Although Spartans prized healthy bodies and valued its male citizens, they also worked on the principle of fear. Plutarch says that he himself saw many young boys whipped to death for various mistakes at the altar of Diana.<sup>11</sup> If this eyewitness account is believed, then the Spartan leadership exercised their power of not only humiliation, but also of torture and death over the younger generation. This power drove the younger boys to survive by withholding their feelings, resentments, questions, and concerns. The Spartans spent much effort in teaching their children no fear. But, is it possible to teach a young child not to fear at all? Or do they learn to fear only certain things - insult, punishment, jeers, disappointment, disgrace, and shame? By giving their children no room for natural emotions, Spartans cut themselves off from the outlets that humans need to help them deal with the reality of life. By emphasizing the lack of fear that a Spartan must possess, they failed to teach them how to deal constructively with the fear that they did feel. This failure helps explain the ease with which the youth dismissed the old education.

H. I. Marrow stated that "Sparta's tragedy was that she matured too soon."<sup>12</sup> He believed that her "steady development came to an abrupt halt in about 550 B.C."<sup>13</sup>



Sparta became rigid, unable to change to accommodate new ideas, new attitudes, and new knowledge. She insisted on retaining the semblance of the older way of life. Change is usually difficult, even if it is for the better. And there were many in Sparta who did not believe that Sparta or her educational system needed to change. Nothing remains on a plateau forever, however. People, societies, systems, and governments must either grow or evolve or they will decline. Therefore, while Sparta's educational system worked well under Lycurgus, the Spartans failure to change with circumstances resulted in a decline of their system.

### Athens

While the Spartan educational system focused on training young men for military service, Athens' educational system groomed their young men for political life. Athens was a democracy and Athenians expected each male citizen to participate. Therefore, it was imperative that their citizens were trained in the art of politics. This training included a knowledge of the laws, the ability to speak well, and wisdom. They accomplished these skills through the teaching of the poets, literature, the arts, and physical fitness.

The Athenians believed a healthy balance between the mind, body, and spirit was necessary for a man to perform at

his utmost. Thus, students learned rhetoric for a sharp mind, studied music for a courageous spirit, and exercised for a fit body. These three elements working together were expected to produce great men capable of ruling well. At this time, with the exception of Plato, the Athenians did not consider it necessary or useful to teach women for political endeavors.

The Athenians' educational philosophy centered around the concept of arete. Although they valued a well-disciplined army, they valued more a man who was just, virtuous, successful, and noble. Therefore, they emphasized a well-rounded education that included not only physical exercises and military training, but also literary arts and music. Thus, their children learned grammar, memorized poetic works, and took music lessons. They exercised to produce symmetrical and graceful bodies, besides the strength which the Spartans prized. And, while they stressed physical education, they deemed a fit body beautiful for the sake of beauty and not for the sake of war.

Another advantage the Athenians had over the Spartans in their children's education was the apprenticeship required for various trades. Sparta engaged solely in war. They relied primarily on slaves to perform the other functions of their city. Athens, on the other hand, trained

their people to function in many capacities other than war, which encouraged a growth in arts and skills.

Athens' educational system changed in the early fourth century B.C. Teachers changed, because the former educators did not wish to allow their students to grow in the direction they desired. Methods changed, because the former methods were not adequate, as the number of topics increased from music and literature to include astronomy, geometry, and drawing and the amount of knowledge within each topic dramatically expanded.

The educational changes did not, however, come easily. The old system and the former teachers fell into disrespect which encouraged a feeling of hostility between the older generation and the younger. The elders, therefore, focused their anger and resentment on the sophists and their teachings in response to their own demise. Instead of responding to the youths' questions and doubts, they reacted against their fall from favor. They refused to see beyond their own pride to the heart of the change in education. Therefore, they took offense instead of trying to be a viable part of the solutions and themselves being the catalyst for their students.

Sophism became the pivotal point for Athenian education, expanding in various directions. Its methods, teachers, and students together opened up entirely new areas

of thought and exposed the usual topics to expanding horizons. The Athenian elders feared the sophists, because they feared the change they brought with them. Of course, not all change is bad or destructive, but all change involves a degree of risk, because one is not able to predict the outcome.

Most, but not all, sophists promoted a fundamental change in the value system as well. Arete diminished in value, while personal power, the ability to influence others for personal gain, and the accumulation of wealth grew in importance. At this point the elder generation and the younger separated irrevocably.

The Athenian elders faced the same problem that the Spartan elders faced after 550 B.C. Their youth questioned their traditions, thus threatening them. The Athenians in particular felt discomfited by the doubts, for they felt that it was not the traditions that the youth questioned, but they themselves. They had created the traditions, and believed in them, because they knew how they came to be. Their words and actions had produced the traditions. Therefore, when the youth questioned the validity of the traditions, they were casting doubt on the lives of the men by which they came about. If the traditions were invalid or no longer useful, then the elders must admit their own failures.

Another reason the Athenian elders felt threatened by the new education lies in understanding that they trusted the youth to be the "stout guardians of our city, and that we shall live in freedom through them, conquering our foes if they attack us and keeping our neighbors in dread of us..."<sup>14</sup> This statement shows the high level of confidence which the elders planned on placing in the next generation.

First, the youth would guard them. This protection allowed the elders to live in comfort, secure in the knowledge that they were safe.

Second, the elders believed that the youth would now make up the bulk of the military strength. This, too, allowed the elders to live their old age in leisure and not in the discomforts of a battlefield. Also, not only would the youth compose the army, but they would be victorious. The elders trusted that they had trained the youth well enough that they would win the battles. Their victories would allow the Athenians to live freely, without fear of enemy reprisals or attacks.

Finally, the elders believed that through their youth would their city retain its influence over others. Their youth's strength and victory in battle kept Athens' enemies and neighbors in terror of attacking them. The youths' devotion to the city would be well-known and feared, for

they would fight not because they were trained to fight, but for their pride in Athens and its citizens.

Therefore, when the youths began to question and denigrate the traditions of the elders, not only the existence of the traditions were at stake. The lifestyle and comforts which the elders had taken for granted now too became uncertain. If the youth did not believe in the old ways and in the role assigned to them by the elders of the city, then they would not necessarily fight courageously or well to maintain them. Defeats could then lead to the failure of Athens' neighbors to fear them. Therefore, not only the youths, but also the teachings of the sophists threatened the Athenian elders' peace of mind.

Plato's educational scheme resembled the Spartan educational system in three ways. Robin Barrow claimed in her book Plato and Education that both were "an initiation into a particular style of life."<sup>15</sup> Both the Spartans and Plato attempted through education to form a particular type of man. Also, Plato wished to have community meals like those of the Spartans. Finally, he, too, incorporated military training into his education.<sup>16</sup> Both cities desired similar characteristics in their men, but to varying degrees and with different emphases. Therefore, they used the same methods, but with a dissimilar purpose.

### Athens and Sparta

Athens and Sparta differed in their beliefs about life's purposes. Their varying beliefs defined their methods of education. Athenians stressed reason, thought, and beauty. The Spartans emphasized military strength. Therefore, Spartans placed physical skill over mental capabilities, whereas Athens did the opposite.

Spartans viewed their physical exercises, and Athens their mental abilities, each as superior over the other for a very specific reason. Sparta relied upon its military might to retain control over its empire, whereas Athens believed in ruling their empire with the mind, in the form of diplomacy and just rule. Therefore, physical strength was of more importance to the Spartans and mental training was of greater value to the Athenians for their desired ends.

The Athenians provided their youth with a two-year, and eventually one-year, compulsory military training. The Spartans, on the other hand, trained their youth from birth. Therefore, the Athenians trusted that in the event of war, their men would find it within themselves to fight courageously and well. They did not think you needed to borrow misery by living in a constant state of war such as the Spartans lived.<sup>17</sup> The Spartans believed they must teach courage and fortitude in order for their men and women to

live consistently in such a manner. Life was preparation for war. The Spartans thought one could be more courageous if one were already conditioned to the normal discomforts of wartime.

A distinct difference between the educational philosophies of the Athenians and Spartans is also evident in the physical exercises and skill competitions. Spartans believed victory on the battlefield led to a collective victory which, in turn, gave honor to the individuals who accomplished the victory. The Athenians saw honor from the opposing perspective. They enjoyed the athletic competitions as means to show off their individual skill and beauty which gave honor to the community. They prized physical attraction and the accomplishments of the individual more highly than the honor of the city. That is not to say that they did not value their city's name, but they praised it precisely because they had so many outstanding men.

The Spartans, on the other hand, placed more value on the prestige of their city than on individual citizens. War became more important, then, as the entire community's honor rests solely upon victory or defeat on the battlefield. A Spartan man expected honor not only for his own merits, but also for the fame he brought to his city.



For these reasons, neither Sparta nor Athens educated their youth with a proper balance between individual and community needs. The Athenians taught them to work for personal glory. The Spartans taught them to work for their city's glory. Yet, both systems failed to endure. The Athenian elders tried to limit the extent to which their youths individualized their lives. When an entire generation fashioned its own ideas and beliefs, the elders wished them to put aside their individuality and retain tradition. But, they had taught them too well, for individuality was their Athenian tradition. Therefore, the Athenian educational system progressed, because they did allow for growth and flexibility. Nevertheless, the progress was not a steady uphill climb, because the elders resisted the changing educational methods and ideas of the students and their sophist teachers.

The Spartans' educational system failed, because they did not allow for any individuality. By stifling the youths' questions, feelings, and yearnings for individuality the Spartans closed themselves to any growth which is necessary for any system to continue. Therefore, by disallowing for expansion and change, the Spartan educational system actually declined. The reason for its existence was lost, thereby rendering it obsolete and ineffective.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>H. I. Marrou, Education in Antiquity, trans. George Lamb (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1956), p. 18.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>3</sup>Greece and the Hellenistic World, eds. John Boardman, Jasper Griffin, Oswyn Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 122-123.

<sup>4</sup>Plutarch, Plutarch's Lives, 4 vols., trans. John Dryden, ed. Arthur Hugh Clough (New York: The Modern Library, 1992), pp. 67-68.

<sup>5</sup>Marrou, Education in Antiquity, p. 24.

<sup>6</sup>Greece, pp. 123-124.

<sup>7</sup>Plutarch, Plutarch's Lives, p. 67.

<sup>8</sup>Greece, p. 122.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 139.

<sup>11</sup>Plutarch, Plutarch's Lives, p. 69.

<sup>12</sup>Marrou, Education in Antiquity, p. 24.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>14</sup>Hugh Parry, Ideals of Education: Spartan Warrior and Athenian All-round Man (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1969), pp. 18-19.

<sup>15</sup>Robin Barrow, Plato and Education (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976), p. 13.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>17</sup>Parry, Ideals of Education, p. 15.

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