ANCIENT GREEK LIFE & SOCIETY

THE LIVES OF MORTALS

Athenians were thought to have considered their citizenship as something very valuable. Society was divided into four social classes based on affluence, but the structure allowed the flexibility for people to change social groups as they accumulated more wealth.

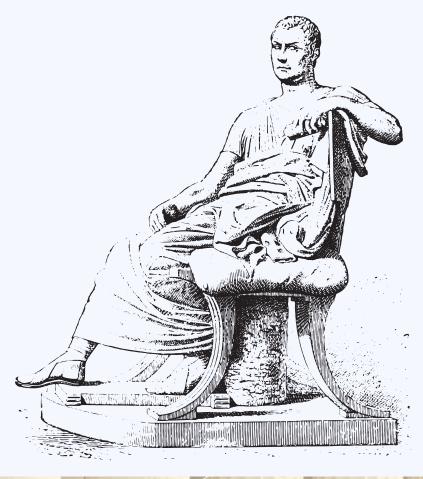
Although the male citizen, with his full legal status, right to vote, hold public office, and own property, may well have dominated Greek society, the social groups which made up the population of a typical Greek city-state (known as a *polis*) were remarkably diverse. Women, children, immigrants (both Greek and foreign), labourers and slaves all has defined roles, but there was interaction (often illicit) between the classes as well as some movement between social groups, particularly for second generation offspring and during times of stress, like war.



THE ARISTOI

The Aristoi were the aristocrats or noblemen of Athenian society. Only free people could be citizens entitled to the full protection of the law in a city-state and the distinction was highly prized.

The aristocrats were often split into powerful family factions or clans who controlled all of the important political positions in the polis. Their wealth came from having property and even more importantly, the best land - the most fertile and the closest to the protection offered by the city walls.



THE PERIOKOI

Periokoi, the second class of citizens, were men who had land but perhaps less productive plots than the Aristoi. Situated further from the city, the land might have been so far away that the owners had to live on it rather than travel back and forth from the city.

These citizens, the *Perioikoi*, collected together for protection in small village communities, subordinate to the neighbouring city. As city populations grew, and inheritances became ever more divided amongst siblings, this secondary class grew significantly.



THE MERCHANT CLASS

The third group were the middle, business class. Engaged in manufacturing, trade and commerce, these were the nouveau riche. The *Aristoi* were known to jealously guard their privileges and political monopoly by ensuring only landowners could rise into positions of real power though.

There was some movement between classes, for example, men could rise by accumulating wealth and influence; others could go down a class by becoming bankrupt which could lead to a loss of citizenship or even being enslaved.

THE LABOURING CLASS

The fourth were the Labouring Class. These were semi-free workers, wholly dependent on their employer. These dependents were not the property of a particular citizen - they could not be sold as a slave could - and they often lived with their families. Generally, they formed arrangements with their employer such as giving a quantity of their produce to the farm owner and keeping the rest for themselves. Sometimes the quota required may have been high or low, and there may also have been some extra benefits to the serfs such as protection and safety in numbers.

SLAVES & METICS

Slaves were seen as a necessary and perfectly normal part of life in Athens and considered a mark of status and wealth. Slaves were obtained through conquest in war, kidnap and through purchase, and were not only owned by private individuals, but by the state. As with every other time period, how well slaves were treated depended upon their status in the household and the temperament of their owners. Some slaves had the opportunity to achieve their freedom, particularly those who worked or lived separately from their owner, as there was more opportunity to gain a small amount of financial independence from which they could pay for their freedom.

Metics were non-Athenians who generally found the cosmopolitan city of Athens more appealing than their own homelands. Metics could not own property, which was crippling in Athenian society, but they could hold jobs for property owners and they did have to pay tax.



WARFARE

Ancient Greece was made up of many competing city-states like Athens and Sparta. This meant that conflicts between these cities was very common as each city aimed to gain more power over the rest. It was important for the city-states to employ citizen-soldiers, who were called hoplites. Hoplites not only defended their city-state, but they were also used to keep order within their home state.

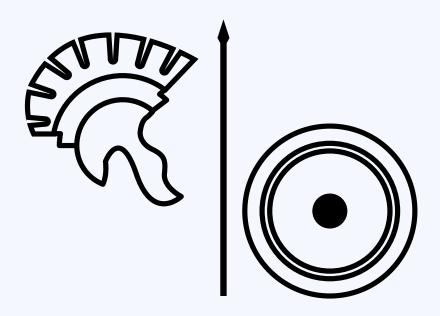
Because most hoplites were farmers or workers in their daily lives, the city-states could not maintain permanent armies, however all hoplites were expected to go to battle when city-state leaders requested their man power. Thus, hoplites were not professional warriors and did not receive a great amount of training. They did practice fighting in ranks and formation though, which created a wall of shields and spears known as a *phalanx*, which took considerable co-operation amongst the soldiers.



WARFARE

During times of peace the men maintained their fitness and endurance with athletics. The typical length of a lap for athletic practice was 400m and the hoplites had to make several laps in their armour which would have weighed about 32kg in total. For most ancient Greek men, military training started after they turned 18. At the outset of their training, the youths dressed in their panoply and uttered the Ephebic Oath (also known as the youth's oath). In this oath the men pledged to fight for their city-state and protect its laws and order.

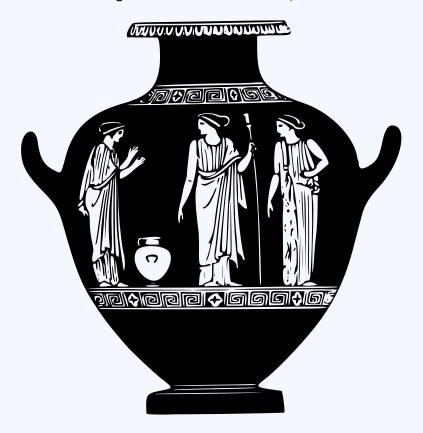
In Sparta, boys left their families at the age of seven begin their 23-year long training. The boys were given only one tunic to wear, little food and had to walk everywhere bare foot. Spartan girls were not allowed to participate in battle, however they were trained to be physically strong and compete with boys in sports in order to defend their city-state while the men were at war.



CRAFTS

The ancient Greeks practised many different crafts including pottery, metalworking, woodworking, shoemaking, weaving and tanning. Crafts could be carried out by free citizens, who would probably have slaves to help, but crafts were generally regarded as inferior work, and so were very frequently practised by resident foreigners, especially in mercantile cities such as Athens. Artisans of particular crafts created enclaves in particular areas of the city. In Athens, for example, the potters were in the Kerameikos district at the edge of the city.

Every object that survives from ancient Greece is a craft object and the processes and people involved in making it can therefore be explored.



CHILDREN

In ancient Greece, where you were born had a big impact on your upbringing. In Sparta, boys stayed at home until they were seven, and then they were taken to the barracks to be trained as soldiers where they would stay until they were 30 years old - eventually fighting for their city-state. Girls from Sparta were also trained to use weapons and fight, this was in case the women had to protect the city while the men warred somewhere else. In this way, most education in Sparta was focussed on creating warriors capable of defending their city and the Spartan way of life.

In other places in ancient Greece, like Athens and Corinth, some children were educated to create good members of society. If you were a wealthy boy in one of these cities, you would have started school when you turned seven and learned reading, writing, math, science, music and poetry. In addition to this, boys and young men were very active and participated in competitions of running, jumping, wrestling and spear-throwing. This training also helped them prepare to become soldiers. Some girls were also taught to read and write, and do math as they had to be able to run the household once they were married. Mostly, girls were taught household tasks such as weaving and cooking. Both boys and girls also played with toys.



WOMEN

Women's and men's domains within society were sharply divided. Politics and business were considered the men's domain, while the household and family were seen as the women's domain. Generally, women were expected to stay out of the men's sphere, although we can reasonably expect that in poor households, women probably had to take a wider role in helping the family to survive. It was also the responsibility of women to visit the tombs of family members, a custom that is well attested on a number of white-ground Greek *lekythoi*.

Women were often unable to vote, own land or inherit, severely limiting their ability to provide for themselves or their family without the support of a man, however practices did vary in different city-states. For example, in Sparta, where the production of pure-blood Spartan children was vitally important, women were

expected to engage in physical exercise in order to become fit for childbirth; and they were also able to own their own land.

In Ancient Greece, women could attend public speeches and visit certain sanctuaries, such as those of Artemis at Brauron and the Sanctuary of the Nymph at the foot of the Akropolis, however during any occasion outside of the house, a young woman was expected to be inconspicuous and to be covered around the head to obscure most of her face and neck.



CLOTHING

In antiquity, fabric was usually a piece of homespun cloth, which could serve as a garment, a blanket or a shroud. Clothing for both women and men consisted of two main garments - a tunic (either a *peplos* or *chiton*), and a cloak (*himation*).

The *peplos* was simply a large rectangle of heavy fabric, usually wool, folded over along the upper edge so that it would reach to the waist. It was placed around the body and fastened at the shoulders with a pin or brooch, and secured with a belt at the waist. A *chiton* was made of a much lighter material, usually linen. Men also wore a *chiton*, similar to the design of the women's, but knee length rather than floor length.





DEATH & THE AFTERLIFE

The Greeks believed that at the moment of death the psyche, or spirit of the dead, left the body and became a 'shade' which would reside in the Underworld. The deceased was then prepared for burial according to the time-honored rituals. Relatives of the deceased, primarily women, conducted the elaborate burial rituals that were customarily of three parts: the laying out of the body, the funeral procession, and the burial or cremation of the body. The body would have been washed, anointed with oil, dressed and often crowned by the older women of the family before being laid out.

Women mourned the dead by wailing and chanting, sometimes tearing at their hair and clothes to enact grief. The *ekphora* was a pre-dawn funeral procession from the house to the grave, outside the city walls. The men in the procession walked ahead of the body while the women went behind, sometimes accompanied by musicians.

The burial, the final stage of the ritual, was sometimes accompanied by animal sacrifice at the graveside, and the placing of grave goods in or on the grave. The grave goods could be offerings of honey, milk, wine, perfumes and oils in vases, or obsidian blade cores. The *lekythos* was a common shape for a funerary vase, often made specifically to be buried and not used in everyday life. From depictions on these whiteground *lekythoi*, we know that the women of Classical Athens made regular visits to the grave with offerings that included small cakes and libations.

DEATH & THE AFTERLIFE

The Afterlife

Hesiod, in his *Theogony* (around 700 BCE) described Tartaros, the deepest part of the Underworld, "as far under the earth as the sky is above". Tartaros, misty and enclosed by a beaten bronze wall, is roofed by the roots of the earth above it. Winds blow incessantly, battering its occupants, creating an eerie and monstrous atmosphere that is "terrible even for the gods". Hades and his wife Persephone presided over the 'shades' of people who had died, and Cerberus the three headed dog, prevented any shades from escaping.

Plato in the 4th century BCE described the soul as immortal, even if the body was not. As such, the soul experienced life in the Underworld as an individual entity. When a mortal died, their soul was taken by a guardian spirit to an assembly place where they were judged, then taken to the Underworld to undergo any punishment and purification required. The judgement of immortal souls was done by the mortal sons of Zeus. The souls to be judged were naked and anonymous, ensuring a king was given the same treatment as a farmer. Plato described death as "nothing but the divorce of two separate entities, body and soul, and when this divorce takes place, each of them is left in much the same state as it reached during the man's life". In this way, both the physical traits and the qualities of the soul are visible.

DEATH & THE AFTERLIFE

Once judged, the soul is conveyed along a river depending on their judgement. All rivers flow into and from the Underworld. Those judged to be neutral travel along the river Acheron where they are purified, absolved of sins and rewarded for good deeds. Those who sinned unforgivably are hurled into the depths of Tartaros and never re-emerge, shunned and wandering guideless in desolation. Those who sinned less severely are also sent to dwell in Tartaros but emerge after a period of penance. People who lived lives of exceptional virtue are released from Tartaros and dwell on the Earth's surface in beautiful surroundings, albeit without bodies.

In imagining the Underworld, ancient writers both channelled and influenced the beliefs of the ancient Greeks. Their understanding of life after death impacted their reaction to death itself.

