Ancient Greek City-States

After the **Greek Dark Ages**, exciting things began to happen in ancient Greece. Villages started to band together to form strong trading centers. These groups of villages that banded together were called **city-states**. Soon, hundreds of city-states had formed in ancient Greece.

The ancient Greeks referred to themselves as **citizens** of their individual city-states. Each city-state or **polis** had its own personality, goals, laws and customs. Ancient Greeks were very loyal to their city-state.

The city-states had many things in common. They all believed in the same gods. They all spoke the same language.

However, if you asked an ancient Greek where he was from, he would not say, "I live in Greece."

If he was from Sparta, he would say, "I am a Spartan."

If he lived in Athens, he would say, "I am an Athenian."

The city-states might join together to fight a common enemy, but they also went to war with each other.

There was no central government in ancient Greece. Each city-state had its own form of government. Some city-states, like Corinth, were ruled by kings. Some, like Sparta, were ruled by a small group of men. Others, like Athens, experimented with new forms of government.

The Three Most Powerful Greek City-States

1. **Athens**

Citizens of Athens were called Athenians. The Athenians thought of themselves as the shining star of the Greek city-states. They were famous for their literature, poetry, drama, theatre, schools, buildings, and government.

Before the Greek Dark Ages, Athens was a just small village. After the Greek Dark Ages, Athens grew rapidly until it was one of the two most powerful city-states in the ancient Greek world. (The other was Sparta.)
The Athenians were very different from the ancient Spartans.

- The Spartans were famed for their military strength.
- Athenians were famed for their commitment to the arts and sciences.

The Greeks believed that each city-state in ancient Greece had a **patron**, which means that a certain god or goddess was in charge of it. For Athens, the patron was Athena, the goddess of wisdom. Perhaps because Athena was their patron, Athenians put a great deal of emphasis on education.

Girls learned at home from their mothers. They learned how to run a household and how to be good wives and mothers.

Boys were educated quite differently. Until age 6 or 7, boys were taught at home. From 7-14, boys attended a day school outside the home. There, they memorized poetry and learned drama, public speaking, reading, writing, math, and music.

After middle school, they went to a four year high school and learned more about math, science, and government. At 18, they attended two years of military school.

There was just cause for Athens to be proud of its system of education for citizens.

Each city-state chose its own form of government. Most Greek city-states were ruled by kings. In Athens, citizens (the free men) met each week to discuss problems. They worked on solutions. The men of Athens experimented with government, and, for about 100 years, Athens was the world’s first **democracy**!

2. **Sparta**

Life was very different in ancient Sparta than it was in the rest of ancient Greek city-states. The Spartans were proud, fierce, capable warriors. No great works of art came out of Sparta. However, the Spartans, both men and women, were tough, and the Greeks admired strength.

Sparta's government was an **oligarchy**. The people were ruled by a small group of warriors. The Spartans spoke Greek, wrote Greek, thought of themselves as Greeks, but they were different.
In most of the other Greek city-states, the goal of education was to create a strong citizen of that city-state. In Sparta, the goal of education was to create a strong warrior!

All of the ancient Greeks were warriors, but Sparta's warriors were legendary.

In Sparta, boys were taken away from their parents at age 7. They lived a harsh and often brutal life in the soldiers’ barracks. Younger children were beaten by older children who started fights to help make the younger boys strong. Children were often whipped in front of groups of other Spartans, including their parents, but they were not allowed to cry out in pain.

Girls went to school, too, to learn how to fight. They lived at home during training. Their training was not as harsh and the boys’, but it was harsh enough. Spartan women were also warriors.

During their training process, children were given very little food. They were encouraged to steal food, instead! If caught stealing, they were beaten. Spartan children learned how to lie, cheat, and steal -- and how to get away with it! The Spartans did this to train more cunning and capable warriors. After all, warriors are not much good if they cannot use their wits to stay alive to fight as long as possible.

As adults, Spartan men did not live with their families. They visited their families, but men lived full-time in the soldiers’ barracks.

As adults, Spartan women, unlike women in the rest of Greek world, had a great deal of freedom. Many ran businesses. Spartan women were free to move about and visit neighbors without permission from their husbands. (How would they get permission? The men were always fighting!)

3. Corinth

As a coastal city-state, Corinth had a glorious history as a cultural and trade center. Corinth was a monarchy. The people were ruled by a king. The king had many advisors who helped him make decisions. Together, Corinth's government solved many problems that cities still face today.

For example, Corinth had a problem with unemployment. To solve this, they created a huge and successful public works program. This gave people work, like
building new aqueducts to move clean water to the city, and solved the city’s problems, such as the need for an additional source of drinking water.

To solve the problem of foreign money pouring into their polis, the government of Corinth created its own currency exchange. They forced traders to exchange foreign coins for Corinth's coins at the Bank of Corinth (for a fee, of course!). Corinthians were very good with money.

Although Corinth's schools were not as fine, perhaps, as those of Athens, their boys were educated in the arts and the sciences. As children, the kids were taught at home. From age 7-14, boys attended a nearby day school, where they studied poetry, drama, public speaking, accounting, reading, writing, math, science, and music. Boys attended a higher school if their parents could afford it. All boys went to military school for at least two years.

Literature, culture, art, and businesses thrived in Corinth. It was a highly respected city-state in the ancient Greek world.