27.5 Education in Athens

Athenian democracy depended on having good citizens. Athenians believed that producing good citizens was the main purpose of education. Since only boys grew up to be citizens, boys and girls were educated quite differently.

Athenians believed that a good citizen had a sharp mind and a healthy body. So education meant physical training as well as book learning. Until age 6 or 7, boys were taught at home by their mothers or male slaves. From age 6 to 14, boys went to school. Teachers taught reading, writing, arithmetic, and literature. Books were rare and very expensive, so subjects were read out loud and the boys had to memorize everything. To help them learn, they used writing tablets. Coaches taught sports such as wrestling and gymnastics to strengthen students’ muscles. Boys also studied music. They learned to sing and to play the lyre.

At 18, Athenian men began their military training. After their service, wealthy young men might study with private teachers. These teachers charged high fees for lessons in debate and public speaking that would help young men become political leaders.

Unlike boys, most girls did not learn to read or write. Girls grew up helping their mothers around the house. They were taught to cook, clean, spin thread, and weave cloth. Some also learned ancient secret songs and dances for religious festivals. Girls usually married around the age of 15. Those from wealthy families married men chosen by their fathers. Girls from poor families often had more choice.
27.9 Education in Sparta

In Sparta, the purpose of education was to produce men and women who could protect the city-state. If a baby did not appear healthy and strong, it might be left to die on a hillside.

Spartans valued discipline and strength. From the age of 7, all Spartan children were trained to fight. Even girls received some military training. They learned wrestling, boxing, footracing, and gymnastics. Spartan boys lived and trained in buildings called barracks. They were taught to read and write, but Spartans did not consider those skills as important.

What was important was to be a brave soldier. Spartan boys were taught to suffer any amount of physical pain without complaining. They marched without shoes. They were not fed well, and they were encouraged to steal food as long as they did not get caught. One Spartan legend tells of a boy who stole a fox because he was starving. When he saw his teacher coming, the boy quickly hid the fox under his cloak. Rather than confess, he let the fox bite his stomach.

At the age of 20 or so, Spartan men were given a difficult test of fitness, military ability, and leadership skills. If they passed, they became Spartan soldiers and full citizens. Even then, they continued to live in soldiers’ barracks, where they ate, slept, and trained with their classmates. A man could not live at home with his wife and family until he was 30 years old. And his military service continued long after that.