

ANCIENT HISTORY: *SPARTA*

With reference to the source below and your own knowledge, explain the main features of the Spartan education system for boys and its importance in shaping Spartan society.

“as boys grew older, the Spartans intensified their training, cutting their hair short and making them used to walking barefoot and for the most part playing naked. When the boys reached the age of twelve, they no longer had tunics to wear, but got one cloak per year. They slept in packs, on beds which they got together on their own.” (Plutarch, *The Life of Lykurgus*)

The agoge was the system of education in Spartan society that promoted physical strength, courage, laconic speak and simple lifestyles.

At birth, boys were examined at the lesche by elders, who determined whether they could live (were strong) or die (were weak or deformed). Weak children were left at the apothetae, or place of rejection, whilst the strong were permitted to enter the agoge. Throughout their childhood spent with their mothers, they were inculcated with the warrior ethos, and according to Plutarch, were left alone when crying.

This warrior ideal was strengthened as soon as they entered the agoge at age 7. They were removed from their families and became property of the state. Plutarch identified the main goal of the system was making them “well-disciplined and steadfast in hardship”. From 7 to 12, physical training was very important, as referenced in Source 1, “they intensified their training”. From an early age they were taught to survive on what they had, encouraged to steal food but punished if caught, as Plutarch details in the story of the boy and the fox cub. Cooperation within their agelai (unit) was promoted. When they reached 13, they were supervised by eirenes or prefects, who taught them to speak laconically and if they didn’t, they were bitten on the thumb by their eirenes. According to Plutarch, they “learned only enough to serve their needs” as the agoge removed most luxury and arts, although the boys did learn to sing and dance, and learn Tyrtaeus’ and Homer’s heroic poems.

From 19-24, boys could become an eirenes and may be called upon to fight in battle. At 20, they also played the rugby-style game, pantakrion, as a rite of passage. Evidence of this can be seen in carvings on pottery. From 30-60, men were citizens and could serve on the front line in battle.

The agoge was very significant in Spartan society, as without it, the military would not have been nearly as strong, disciplined and cooperative. The krypteia or ‘secret police’ was also integral, as it kept the helots, who outnumbered Spartiates 20 to 1, at bay. Without the rigid, military ethos the agoge produced, Sparta would not have been idiosyncratic, and it would have been likely that the helots would rebel against them.