

ODD LEGENDS/ACCOUNTS ABOUT THE SPARTANS:

The following legends about Spartan culture are a collected mishmash from classical literature and history. We have to take them with a grain of salt because (a) they were mostly written down by Sparta's more literate enemies and (b) in the case of Late Hellenic historians, they were written down 300 years after the fact. With that *caveat*, read on.

The Romans believed that Spartan houses had a special room that was kept hot and dry for health benefits--sort of an anti-sauna. Since the Romans admired the Spartans, wealthy Roman estates would build similar rooms, which the Romans called "*laconicii*" (singular *laconicum*). The Latin term comes from a synonym for "Spartan."

One bit of Spartan technology was the *kothon*, a special two-pint cup used in military service. It was designed for easy transport, and it had a series of dark and pale ridges that allowed one to see any impurities as one drank. Soldiers often had to drink unclean water while on campaign. Typically, when the boisterous, party-loving Athenians learned of the technology, they used it not in the military, but for assessing the quality of wine, something Aristophanes makes fun of in one of his comedies called *The Banqueters*.

The Spartan heralds used "message staffs" called *skytalê*, according to Thucydides, Xenophon, and Plutarch, and Aulus Gellius. The message was written on leather and wrapped around a stick for easy transport. Plutarch and Aulus Gellius assume the messages were in cipher, but that does not appear to be the case in the early writers like Xenophon and Thucydides. According to Diodorus, the Lacedaemonians (Spartans) would have two round staffs of identical size--one kept in Sparta and the other in possession of a military commander out in the field. The strip of leather would be rolled slantwise around the staff and the dispatch written lengthwise on it. When unrolled, the dispatch would be unintelligible, but if rolled slantwise around the commander's *skytalê* of the same size and length, it could be read wrapping around the staff.

The military kept two rocky pits near Sparta as execution sites. One, the **Apothetai Chasm**, was the place where "inadequate" children would be hurled or left exposed to the elements to die. (This "inadequacy" may mean physical deformity or handicap, or it may mean male children who were incapable of finishing military training.) A second pit, the **Caeadas Chasm**, was the place where criminals and spies would be hurled to their doom after the *Krypteia* (secret-police) identified them.

Unlike the loquacious and chatty Athenians, the Spartans were notoriously untalkative and prided themselves on concision and silence. Thus we get our English word *laconic* in reference to their homeland of Lacedaemonia. Unlike northern Greece, which loved art, decoration, sculpture, and music, the Spartans saw this as wasteful and kept everything drab and uniform without decoration--hence the modern English adjective *spartan*.

According to Plutarch's *Life of Lycurgus*, sections 12 and 25, the Spartans were famously able to take teasing and joking without becoming angry. The founder of the Spartan system of *helot*-governance, Lycurgus, had a little statue of Laughter built which would be set up at Spartan drinking parties as a contrast with their normally rigorous and violent lifestyle. Interestingly, if we trust Herodotus (6.60), the Spartans also had a hereditary guild of cooks, who would be trusted with the state secret of the "**Spartan Black Broth**," their military super-food of ghastly taste but highly nutritious nature.

According to Pausanias, the early Spartans had a curious hazing contest in which groups of their young military trainees would be kept half-starved until they engaged in a public fight with each other over hunks of cheese on an altar. This was a sort of endurance test, and the winner would get the food but also be declared the *bomonikes* (possibly a victor worthy of officer-status?), who had a statue erected in his honor or a large inscription of his name placed in a prominent area. Much later, the endurance contest was changed to see which boy could endure public whipping longest without crying uncle. In post-Hellenic times, after Rome had conquered the Greek city-states, this became a sort of bizarre tourist-attraction, and Romans would come each spring to pay money to watch the Spartan youths be whipped, and in the 3rd century CE, the commercialized Spartans erected a theater around the altar.

According to Plutarch in *The Sayings of the Spartan Women*, when young Spartan men went off to war, their mothers would tell them, "Come back *with* your shield or come back *on* it." The idea was that if a man came back without his shield, it meant he had panicked and thrown it away in flight. He would "come back on his shield" as a corpse being carried by his comrades. In other words, the Spartan mom was saying, "Either come back victorious and brave, or come back dead, but don't you dare show signs of cowardice!" Spartan women and men spent most of their lives in strict segregation before marriage. Plutarch said that the garb of women there was called *phainomerides* (literally, "high-displays"). They were a sort of quasi-tunic in which the skirt would not be sewn from the hem, so it would fall open while walking. It was made of heavy wool fabric, so it could perform the duty of both a cloak or a *peplos* tunic. It would be pinned on each shoulder by a fibula, and was left unsewed, so only one side of the body would be covered by the garment at any time. This is not too surprising, given that Greece generally had no taboos about nudity. What is surprising was that, if a young Spartan soldier were to marry, his young female bride would be dressed up in soldier's garb and given a false beard to wear on their wedding night.

The Spartans had one celebration called the Festival of the Cleaver. The entertainment at these festivities was that the Spartans would nail sausages to the wall and watch older, toothless men gnaw on them. (See *Athenaeus* 138e). Mighty peculiar people, those Spartans.