

NOTES ON QUIZ 3

1 Who were the helots, and why was Sparta so dependent on them?

The helots were state-owned serfs. In origin they were the conquered peoples of Laconia and neighboring Messenia, subdued early in Sparta's history and permanent "prisoners of war." Each helot family farm provided a fixed amount of food year-round for a Spartan warrior, freeing the Spartans from the distractions of managing land, laborers, and produce. The helot families retained for their own use anything beyond what was levied, which is why they are at least nominally considered serfs and not slaves.

The Spartan system was heavily dependent on the helots. Because they greatly outnumbered the Spartan citizenry, which was restricted to the warrior elite (the homoioi), the Spartans were constantly alert to the dangers of uprising among the helots and feared marching their armies too far from home. To reinforce their status as prisoners of war, young Spartans were required to literally hunt helots as part of their training. Helots were also paraded before the young warriors drunk and humiliated to train them to think of helots as an inferior class.

2 What was the agōgē? Why was it so important to Spartan culture?

All boys who survived the weeding out of the unfit as infants were removed to the barracks at age 7 to undergo a collective education by the state designed to train (or brain-wash, depending on your point of view) each succeeding generation in the all-importance of training to become invincible warriors. The education was built entirely around building the endurance and training necessary to live and fight as idealized hoplite warriors in harsh and unforgiving conditions. The boys were expected to become tough and cunning. They continued this training up through the age of thirty, remaining in the barracks even if they got married, as they were allowed to do after 20. The shared experience, on small band and larger groups that shared a mess and quarters, fostered loyalty, solidarity, and cooperativeness, as important to a hoplite warrior as skill in fighting and the ability to endure hardship.

The agoge did not educate boys in arts, science, or anything else besides the skills necessary to become a Spartan warrior. As such it reflected the Spartan culture's fixed perception that any pursuit but war was a distraction that could debase an individual Spartan and weaken and make vulnerable Sparta herself.

EC1 The "mixed constitution" of the Spartan government included all of the following EXCEPT:

(c) A high priest who could overturn any law

EC2 What is "the Spartan mirage"?

Among both ancients and later writers in medieval and modern times, the purity of Spartan society — their unchanging pursuit of perfection — presented a compelling alternative to the wrenching turmoil experienced by less conservative societies enduring the constant and unpredictable upheavals associated with social, political, and economic "progress." Writers thinking along these lines, which might include anyone from Athenians who admired the Spartans (like Xenophon) to Renaissance writers like Machiavelli to Victorian classicists dismayed by change in their own times, will tend to greatly idealize both the Spartans and their system. This effect is reinforced by the paucity of surviving testimony from the Spartans themselves.