Culture & Everyday Life in Sparta
Using archaeology
With reference to Source R and other sources, what does the evidence reveal about people’s lives in this period?

He (Lycurgus) even authorised them (the Spartans) to use other people’s household servants if anybody needed them. He also authorised hunting dogs to be shared, so that men who need some, ask to take them on their hunt, and the owner is pleased to send them if he is not at leisure himself.

*Source R: Xenophon, Constitution of the Spartans 6*
The sources

Justly may you, 0 Lacedaemonians, be praised in that you do not give special honour or a special education to wealth rather than to poverty, or to a royal rather than to a private station, where the divine and inspired lawgiver has not originally commanded them to be given. For no man ought to have pre-eminent honour in a state because he surpasses others in wealth, any more than because he is swift of foot or fair or strong, unless he have some virtue in him; nor even if he have virtue, unless he have this particular virtue of temperance.


.. [H]e divided the country of Laconia in general into thirty thousand equal shares, and the part attached to the city of Sparta into nine thousand; these he distributed among the Spartans, as he did the others to the country citizens. Some authors say that he made but six thousand lots for the citizens of Sparta, and that King Polydorus added three thousand more. Others say that Polydorus doubled the number Lycurgus had made which according to them was but four thousand five hundred.

Plutarch, Lives: Lycurgus. Trans. John Dryden
Modern texts

Occupations and leisure Spartans

For a Spartan, warfare was the only occupation that did not convey a social stigma. Apart from war and training for it, Spartiates could play a part in overseeing the training of Spartan youth and could participate in the *ekklesia*. Acquiring wealth was meant to be irrelevant to their lives and no Spartiate was supposed to be involved in trade. However, there is evidence that Spartan citizens had once followed crafts and that some may have continued to do so. Spartans were not supposed to eat, drink and be merry. Excessive drinking, in particular, was held in contempt in Sparta. Apart from the time spent in the common mess and with families, hunting appears to have been the most popular Spartan pastime. Hunting was one of very few acceptable excuses for absence from the mess. Wild boars were the most sought after prey and Central Taygetus, the highest part of the mountain range, was considered the best hunting ground. According to Xenophon, any Spartan had the right to use another's horses and stores during hunting expeditions.

Wealthy Spartiates were expected to live the same way as other Spartans. This did not prevent them from displaying prosperity through their victories in the four-horse chariot racing at Olympia. Because of the shortage of grazing land, horses were expensive to keep and were owned only by aristocrats and the rich.
Spartan hunters killing a wild boar, Laconian cup, c.555 BC.

Bronze figure of a horse, probably made in Sparta around 700 BC. British Museum.

Bronze figure of a reclining banqueter, probably made in Sparta about 530-500 BC. British Museum.
Bronze mirror handle representing a Spartan woman

Male figure from the Spartan acropolis

A bronze statuette of a soldier.
Spartan work, around 500BCE.
Small bronze figurine of a running satyr, associated with the god Dionysos.

Small bronze figurine depicting a crested hoplite riding in a chariot.

Small bronze figurine, a votive from the Amyklaion, depicting a naked athlete. The figure wears a wreath of palm leaves or reeds on its head. Palm leaves were worn on the head at the Gymnopaediai, and reeds at the Karneia.

All these bronzes are now in the National Archaeological Museum, Athens.
Vase made by Laconian artists and exported to Rhodes
Two laconian cups showing The Rider and a religious ritual. The archaeological record for this sort of pottery extends down until the end of the 6th century.
Black figure Lakonian kylix depicting the hero Bellerophon, aided by the magic flying horse Pegasos, killing the monster Chimera. The Chimera was a combination of lion, she-goat and serpent. Diameter: 14 cms. Sparta, 570-565 BC. Attributed to the Boreas Painter. J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu, California, USA.

Arkesilaos, king of Kyrene in North Africa, supervises the weighting of merchandise. Spartan cup of mid sixth century BCE.
Relief carvings of horses, in bone. These were probably ornaments affixed to a wooden object. The two horses, although displayed together in the National Archaeological Museum, Athens, are not a pair. Height: left 9 cms; right 9.2 cms.
SPARTAN IVORY
PLAQUES AND BROOCHES

Fragments of ivory found at the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia in the National Archaeological Museum, Athens.

1. Ivory brooch depicting the ‘Mistress of the Wild Things’ grasping birds. Height: 5 cms.
2. Ivory brooch plate depicting a soldier on horseback. Height: 4.1 cms.
3. Ivory brooch depicting a goddess and her consort flanking a tree of life. Height: 5.2 cms.
An amphora from 6th Century BCE, decorated with mythical scenes. It shows the Greek hero, Herakles, confronting Geryon, the three-bodied monster. The cowherd, Euryton lies on the ground, mortally wounded.
LARGE BRONZE VESSELS

Left – The Grächen hydria

On the shoulder of the vessel is a figurine depicting the winged Artemis Orthia as “The Mistress of the Wild Things”. She stands on a patera. In each hand the goddess holds a hare and she is flanked by lions with elaborate manes and decoratively curved tails. Two more lions sit on the rim of the vessel their feet resting on snakes. An eagle perches on Orthia’s head.

Right – The Pesaro hydria

In this case it is a crested hoplite who stands on a patera and he is flanked by two horses. The crest on the soldier’s helmet is in the shape of two horse heads which rest on snakes that join to the rim of the vessel. The handles on each side of the hydria are in the form of rearing horses.

Left – The Vix krater

The handles of this massive vessel are in the form of elaborate volutes (scroll-like decorations) and each incorporates the figure of a gorgon monster. The legs of the gorgon become snakes that join the volute to the shoulder of the vessel and her hands rest on her thighs. Running around the neck of the krater is a decorative band showing warriors and chariots.

The Vix krater – a Spartan bronze vessel found in the grave of a Celtic princess in Burgundy, France in 1953.

Left: This massive bronze vessel stands 1.54 m high, and the bowl has a diameter of 1.40 m. It is possibly the most impressive bronze vessel to survive from antiquity.

Below: Detail of the decorative band with a frieze 14 cm high around the neck of the krater. There are 23 groups of figures in relief – warriors and chariots – which were cast separately and riveted to the bronze vessel.
A unique society?

To be sure, the Spartiates shared many basic institutions with other Greeks: their society was patriarchal and polytheistic, servile labour played a key role, and agriculture formed the basis of the economy. As elsewhere in Greece, law was revered and martial valour prized. Nonetheless, Sparta was unique in many important ways. No other Greek state ever defined its goals as clearly as Sparta or expended so much effort in trying to attain them. While the intrusion of the state into the lives on individuals was substantial in all Greek states, no state surpassed Sparta in the invasive role in played in the daily lives of its citizens. Spartans took an enormous pride in their polis, and other Greeks were impressed by the rigorous patriotism and selflessness the Spartan system entailed. The Spartans' extreme denial of individuality fostered a powerful sense of belonging that the other Greeks envied ...

The Spartan Mirage

The useful expression of the Spartan mirage (*le mirage spartiate*) was invented in the 1930s by the French scholar Francois Ollier ... He coined it to describe the idealization of Sparta in Greek antiquity, that is, the distorted or entirely imaginary literary tradition about ancient Sparta – what Sparta was, what it had achieved, what it stood for. This false image, or series of images, was of course projected originally by the Spartans themselves, for their own internal purposes, and it was constantly revisited and revised by them .... "harmlessly, ... , spartan is now frequently used as an epithet meaning tough, rigorous, disciplined, austere, self-denying, spare, minimally comfortable or comfort-seeking .... The ancient version of the literary mirage had three main components. First, it maintained that time out of mind the Spartan polity had been uniquely free from internal disorder and civil strife (*stasis*). Second, it claimed that this utopian situation was owed mainly to the fact that since time immemorial Spartan citizens had dutifully obeyed the laws laid down for them by their wondrously omniprovident lawgiver Lykourgos. Third, it promoted the idea that these laws, which were to differ in strikingly important ways from's those of all other Greek states, affected absolutely every aspect of Spartan life, private no less than public. That was the agreed minimum content of the mirage.

Battle cry... the Spartan king (Gerard Butler) at war.

that Leonidas was allowed to take from Sparta, will cut them down in
waves, with superior tactics.

Herodotus, the Greek historian, tells us that this is what happened.

Leonidas held off the Persians for
two days at the pass, slaughtering
20,000 of their number with a disci-
plined defence, as Xerxes watched
from a throne on a hill. The Greeks
probably numbered more like 7000
at the start but let's not worry about
that. This is the story of the brave
300 Spartans, not the semi-brave
5000 or more other Greeks.

The reason it's only about the
Spartans is that the film seeks to
glory their martial culture, as a
metaphor for America. Miller
admires the toughness of their
culture, in which weak babies were
left to die on a mountain and boys
were turned into expert killers who
obeyed orders without question.

Spartan men could have only one
profession – soldier. Spartan
women, personified in the film by
the gorgeous Queen Gogo (Lena
Headey), were almost as tough.

The graphic novel was first
published in 1998, but there's no

In the name of freedom

Sixpacks, swords ease history back into classrooms