



Sparta, a powerful, militarised and utterly bonkers city-state in Ancient Greece, has incited the imagination of everyone from Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the French philosopher, to Victorian headmasters to the Nazis to elite military units to Hollywood.

And now it's your turn.

Can you navigate Sparta's complex social structures and join the Krypteia, the Spartan elite? Play our adventure and find out.

Episode One

You are born in 512 BCE.

If you have a penis, go to episode three.

If you don't have a penis, go to episode two.



Episode Two

As a Spartan girl, you have more freedom than your counterparts in Athens – partly because the menial jobs, such as sewing and weaving, are taken care of by helots, the enslaved people of a neighbouring city.

After a rounded domestic education involving reading, writing, wrestling, racing, riding and laughing at the boys when they have to strip off their tunics in front of you,* you are free to perform your primary duty: staying healthy so that you can give birth to future Spartans.

From the age of twenty you can marry a man who is thirty. But you will never join the male elite.

The End



Episode Three

You are taken to the ephors, the magistrates elected each year. They inspect you and the other male babies.

If you cry in a wussy manner, go to episode four.

If you flex your big baby biceps, go to episode five.

* This was thought to be 'character-building'.



Episode Four

Oh dear. It's the Apothetai for you, a ravine at the foot of Mount Taygetus.* Your Spartan adventure has been dashed on the rocks.

The End



Episode Five

Well done. You look like a fine, strapping lad, ready to grow up and defend a city protected by the sea to the south and dark hills to the north.

Aged seven, you are sent to the equivalent of a boarding school, where you undergo the agōgē, a military training procedure focused on wrestling, drills and foraging.

You will be bred, just like a horse or a dog, in a conscious form of eugenics.†

Talk too much and you will be beaten – potentially to death.

Get too fat and you risk being banned from the city-state.

Move too slowly during the cheese-ducking games in the Temple of Artemis Orthia and you will be whipped by grown men before you can dodge them and reach the cheese-laden table.

Your final test before you can join the Krypteia, the elite, is

* This, at least, was the claim made by Plutarch, writing more than half a millennium later – although it is widely distrusted by even later historians.

† There is clear textual evidence for the Nazis being influenced by the Spartans during their occupation of Eastern Europe. Hitler even claimed that the famous Spartan black broth, a dish so disgusting that Athenians joked that this was why Spartans had no fear of death, originated from Schleswig-Holstein.

THE REST IS HISTORY

to go to neighbouring Messene and kill a helot, probably one who has shown initiative, to help Sparta breed a more doltish, servile population.*

But don't worry, you won't be charged with murder. The ephors declare war annually on the Mycenaeans so that these murders are sanctioned.

If you have the stomach for this final hazing ritual, go to episode seven.

If you have qualms about murdering a slave, go to episode six.



Episode Six

You've failed the agōgē and are no better than the perioikoi, the non-citizens who do all the other jobs so that the real Spartans can focus on being warriors.

The End



Episode Seven

It is now 480 BCE and you're a member of the hippeis, the elite bodyguard of King Leonidas.† You've got one beefy young son, who has passed the ephors' baby test and is now enjoying being bullied at boarding school.

So you are expendable.

* In 465 BCE, following a devastating earthquake and a helot revolt, the Spartans offered prizes to any helot who would help them. Some 2,000 helots stepped forward, whereupon it is thought that the Spartans killed them all.

† The Spartans had two kings. Leonidas, the hero of Thermopylae, was lionised by everyone from Origen, the great church father, to the poet Byron to the novelist William Golding. His co-ruler, Leotychidas II, has twelve lines on Wikipedia.

SPARTA

Armed only with black Speedos, a spear and a Scottish accent,* you're among the 300 Spartans chosen to hold off a million Persians at the Battle of Thermopylae.

You're handsome and ripped – a good person.

You're not Ephialtes, the traitor (played as morally and physically deformed in the film *300*) who leads the Persians around the rear of the pass.

You die.

But it is not in vain.

The Persians win the battle – and lose the war.

Your grandchildren will fight and win the Peloponnesian War, emerging triumphant over Athens by the end of century.

Your great-grandchildren will be defeated by the Thebans in 371 BCE, marking a period of rapid decline before Sparta is eventually absorbed into the Roman Empire in 146 BCE.

But Sparta will eventually emerge from the ashes, its powerful myth revitalised by the Greek War of Independence in 1830.†

And your feats will live on in fable – and in Hollywood – for ever.

The End

* Not all details of *300*, the Hollywood blockbuster film, are accurate. However, it is more realistic than a film such as *Gladiator*, which imports an anachronistic liberal Roman senator (there was no such thing) in Derek Jacobi's character to keep a modern audience onside. Although the ephors would definitely have enjoyed *300*, the *Guardian* gave it two stars.

† This myth is based on so few sources – fragments of pottery; a couple of contemporary poets; authors such as Plutarch writing many centuries later – that historians refer to it as the 'Spartan mirage'.