Athens and Sparta were the two most powerful city states in Ancient Greece. From about 479–431 BC, Athens enjoyed a period of great prosperity known as the Golden Age. Science, philosophy and the arts flourished, as did democracy under the statesman, Pericles. Sparta was an oligarchy, led by two kings. There was intense rivalry between Athens and Sparta.

The city of Athens is dominated by the Acropolis hill, with the Parthenon temple complex on the top. In 480 BC, Athens was destroyed by the Persian army. After the Persians were defeated, Pericles ordered that the city be rebuilt. The Parthenon was constructed between 447–438 BC.

Pots of life
Much of what we know about the Greeks comes from their pottery. Pots were often decorated with scenes of everyday life. These tell us about Greek fashion, homes, work and religion. There were many different sizes, shapes and styles of pots, depending on their use. The Amphora, for example, were used to store oil and wine.

Athenian-style pottery

Most Greek houses, like those in Athens, above, were fairly simple buildings made of sun-dried mud bricks. Wealthier Greeks built their houses round central courtyards, where a well would provide water. Men entertained their friends in the andron, at the front of the house.

Training Spartan style
Life was very different in Sparta. Every Spartan male had to train to become a soldier. At the age of seven, boys were sent to military camp. Conditions were harsh and discipline was strict. The boys were kept hungry and had to steal food to make them more cunning. As a result, the Spartans had a reputation for being the toughest warriors in Greece.

Boys joined the military at age 20.

Babies were checked at birth. Weak babies were left to die.

All Spartan girls did sport.

Like most big cities, Athens had a bustling market place, called the agora. People came here to buy and sell goods, and to meet up with their friends.

According to legend, Athens was named after the goddess of war and wisdom, Athene (below). She beat the sea god, Poseidon, in a contest to see whose name the city would take. Each had to offer something to the city. Athene’s gift of an olive tree, providing fruit and oil, was considered more valuable than Poseidon’s promise of rich sea trade, and so she won. The contest is said to have taken place on top of the acropolis. The temple complex was later built on this special spot and is dedicated to Athene.