



A Brief History of Classical Education

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Lesson 4: The History of Ancient Education

Outline:

Ancient Education and Its Questions

- Ancient Education is all about character formation. The question is “What sort of character?” What are the morals towards which to form students?
- *Scholé* presents another issue. Ancients had less time to devote to proper *scholé*.
- The presence of corporeal punishment was questioned by many because it seemed to treat students as slaves (coercing them to do their work through physical pain).
- The “intellectual life” caused controversy because it often raised questions that unsettled the normal order. (i.e. Cicero held that the ideas of the Stoics made people complacent in the face of evil and some held that Plato’s ideas inspired people to go and assassinate the ruler of their town)

Roman Education

- Three outcomes: Philosopher, Statesman, and Soldier
- Discussion of Liberal Arts originates in Rome especially with Cicero (without formalization of Medieval period)
- Education connected to the idea of *pietas* (from which we get the English words “piety” and “pity”). *Pietas* does not mean “piety,” it means “loyalty.”
 - *Pietas* is loyalty to one’s family, people, city, and the gods.
Loyalty to the gods is what the English notion of piety refers to, but *pietas* encompasses more.
- Traditional Roman education is dictated by the *paterfamilias* (the head of the family – a father with power over all and everything in the family).
 - The *paterfamilias* often educated the children himself. (Famously Cato the Elder educated his children.)
- Education in the Roman family was for both men and women though they were educated differently.



“Aeneas & Anchises” by Pierre Lepautre
(a famous show of *pietas*)

- Women were expected to be literate but not much is known about their education. Women were in some instances instrumental in education. (i.e. Cornelia Africana was instrumental in educating her sons the Gracchi.)
- Roman Education was distinct from the Greek education.
 - Romans were not interested in playing musical instruments or gymnastic to beautify the body (thought these were vain and soft and did not follow military virtue).
- There was a transition that occurred from this traditional education to a formalization of education in the 3rd Century BC with the introduction of Greek poetry to the Romans by Livius Andronicus which led to the first truly Roman literature by Gnaeus Naevius.
- As things develop, the *paterfamilias* (and household education) institution continues, but there emerged variations between the rich and the poor. The rich can afford and hire private tutors and the poor go to schools.

Distinctives of Roman Schooling

- In the 4th Century, The Edict of Diocletian separated educators into 3 categories in order from earlier to later education: (1) *Litterator*, (2) *Grammaticus*, and (3) *Rhetor* (i.e. Quintilian). The distinctions may have been present before they were codified in the 4th Century.
- Teachers were paid very little.
- They might meet anywhere people could gather and meet (like Medieval education, not necessarily a dedicated school space).



“The Orator” (a bronze sculpture of Aule Metele)

- Students would come and go in order to tend to their other responsibilities.
- Students advance by ability rather than age.
- When studying with the *Litterator*: Study reading, writing, and arithmetic. Particularly, Greek and Roman literature. Students learn to read moving from letters, to syllables, and finally to words.
- When studying with the *Grammaticus*: The same skills continued to advance along with added music, astronomy, natural science, and such. (clearly a bit of the Trivium and Quadrivium is present but not formalized at all)
 - There were not strict distinctions between disciplines. One main purpose of understanding nature was to understand certain illusion in poetry.
- When studying with the *Rhetor*: Ethics and statesmanship along with the Liberal Arts more generally. (i.e. Cicero spent a lot of time discussing

Liberal Arts in his writing on the orator.)



- Pedagogy was not formal. Focused on memorization and exercises. Students were assessed on the spot often with competitions and ranking of students.
- In teenage years, students were prepared for working life by apprenticeship or groomed for politics (depending on class).
- When studying rhetoric students would study court cases looking at conflict as well as “declamations” (memorizing or writing and presenting a speech).
- Students who could afford it were sent abroad for a year (often to Greece and Asia Minor).
- Learning to be a soldier was a key part of Roman Education because nearly all classes of people needed to have this knowledge for future work. (i.e. use of arms, wearing armor, fighting under harsh conditions, etc.)
 - This is the sort of knowledge that traditional Roman education was known for (and Cato the Elder taught his sons).
- Political training was fulfilled through the “Cursus Honorum” (courses of office). You have to hold certain office at certain time and could move up through the ranks to Consul. It was very prestigious if one could hold all the offices at the minimum age one could legally do so. (Cicero did this as a product of his mastery of the Liberal Arts.)
- Philosophy was also a key component in Roman education though they adopted the vast majority straight from the Greeks.
- After the Republic (when there were only private libraries), Caesar and many Emperors built libraries with public money. There were 28 public libraries in Rome.
 - Many of the texts in Roman libraries were moved to Constantinople later on and were lost to the west. Some suggest that there was more interest in the Eastern part of the Empire in transmitting pagan texts. (Though Benedictine Monasteries did much to preserve texts.)
 - Palimpsest – a practice that developed because papyrus was extremely valuable. Often a pagan writing (like some of the work of Archimedes) was scraped off the page and, for instance, a Christian work was written on top. (Many works have been recovered because the old work is still faintly visible.)

How Did Roman Education End?

- Tacitus complains about the shift from household to formalized education.
 - He said, in household education, to learn how to be a statesman you would go and observe the courts first-hand. With the Greek influence and professionalization, education became more about professionalization.
- In the time of Caligula and following, there was consistent criticism that Rhetoric focused more on style than substance.

Greek Education – The Spartans

- The Spartan system was called *Agoge* (ἀγωγή) literally meaning “guidance.”



- Said to be established by the great Spartan lawgiver, Lycurgus.
- Purpose: to produce the most courageous soldiers possible.
- Lycurgus supposedly had the walls of Sparta destroyed and said that the Spartans themselves would be the wall of Sparta.
- The *Spartiate* (Σπαρτιάτης) is one who has completed the education and is accepted into the community as a citizen.
- Preservation of tradition was very important for the Spartans which meant piety to elders.
 - The Spartan concept of piety was similar in some ways and different in others from the Roman concept of piety. They both include a respect for the others, the community, and the divine (i.e. Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War which features the theme of piety).
- When a child was born in Sparta, he or she would be examined by the *Gerousia* (γερουσία) (a word which means "council of elders" – a Greek equivalent of the Latin word "Senate"). If the *Gerousia* found that the child was deformed or lacking, it would be "exposed" (left outside to die).
- Education in Sparta was from ages 7 to 30.
- Students were put in groups so that they would eventually be able to be put in a group called a *syssitia* (συσσίτια) which is a word that refers to a mess hall for a group of men. Once you joined a *syssitia*, they would be a sort of family, but in actuality was your military unit.
 - In this there is a major distinction between Rome and Sparta. Both emphasize the family, but Sparta heavily deemphasized the family's importance.
- Education included extensive military training, exercise, hunting, athletic training and competitions, etc.
- Students were intentionally underfed so that they would be forced to steal to survive. Yet there were very harsh punishments if caught stealing. This was to prepare them for lack of food in battle.
- Teenagers were mentored while in a sexual relationship with an elder Spartan (pederasty). The morality of this was a serious debate in Plato's work.
- In the late teens and twenties, Spartan students entered into the *Crypteia* (κρυπτεία from κρυπτός, "hidden or secret things"). The Helots were the perpetual slave class of the Spartan society. They outnumbered the Spartans and so there was always a risk they would rebel. The *Crypteia* would spy on, steal from, determine if helots were being loyal, and such.
- Some scholars think it may have been part of the Spartan's education to kill a Helot (or as a child to kill a Helot child). This may be merely anti-Spartan propaganda.
- It is debated as to how literate the Spartans were. Plutarch indicates that Spartan mothers and sons would write each other.
- Between the ages of 20 and 30, Spartans could be accepted into a *syssitia* (τὰ συσσίτια). If they were not accepted, they could never have citizenship. If they



were accepted, they became a citizen and could marry and be part of the commonwealth.

- The emphasis on the *sysitia* meant that the family was neglected. If the *Saprtiate* was to see his family, he would often have to sneak away to visit them. This was often heavily criticized some.
- There was serious education of women. They were expected to wrestle, run, throw discus, etc.
 - Spartan women dressed simply,
 - but in a revealing way. (Outsiders did not find this very attractive.)
 - Spartan women were expected to play an important role of pushing the men to be better warriors by (when young) mocking the boys as they exercise and (when mothers) would have a certain austerity that would inspire their sons to virtue. (Famously mothers would tell their sons to “come back with your shield or on it.”)

How did Spartan Education End?

- The *Sysitia* required members to pay dues. Because Spartans were so focused on war, many neglected the land and could not pay their dues. At times in Spartan history, this was so bad that they could not a large number of *Saprtiates*.
- The neglect of the family was very destabilizing.
- The women sometimes left to run things and there were problematic conflicts between them.
- 3rd Century BC onward: The *Agoge* system dwindled, sometimes being abolished and other times brought back. By the time Rome started to establish its rule in Greece, it started to disappear.

Greek Education – The Athenians

- The traditional Athenian education is often called *Paideia* (παιδεία).
 - *Paideia* is not a technical term. It simply means “the things concerning children.”
- The ideal for Athenian education was *kalokagathia* (καλοκαγαθία) which means “to be beautiful and good” or *kalos kagathos* (καλὸς κἀγαθός) meaning “beautiful and good.”
 - Sometimes this is translated as “being a gentleman.”
 - *Kalokagathia* has two parts:
 - Being a great warrior and giving service to the community
 - Being a lover of beauty and wisdom
 - *Kalokagathia* is deeply related to *scholé* especially because Athenian writers such a Plato hold that virtue is the beauty of the soul.
- There was a focus on music and gymnastic.
 - “Music” was not only playing an instrument, but also all the arts of speech and listening.
 - “Gymnastic” concerned the beautification of the body.



- Up to 7 years old, education was in the home.
- After 7, there was elementary education.
 - We get the word “pedagogy” from the Greek word *paidagogos* (παιδαγωγός, “child leader) which
 - refers to a slave who would lead the children to school.
 - Students would learn reading, writing, calculation, and drawing.
 - There was a teacher called a *paidotribes* (παιδοτρίβης) who taught gymnastic.
- Later education would include singing, playing an instrument, poetry, dancing, wrestling, running, and other sports.
- In late teens, there was a shift to military training.
 - Athenian citizenship is connected to military service as well as ethnicity (both parents must be Athenian).
- They studied:
 - The works of Hesiod and Homer (chiefly)
 - Other poets like Museus
 - Comic and Tragic poets who presented plays at festivals dedicated to Dionisius featuring moral lessons as the chorus calls the listener back to virtue. These plays were offerings to the gods and so were deeply religious while calling the people to virtue.
 - Aristophanes explicitly explains that Comedy and Tragedy are about advising the people.
- Less is known about the education of women. Scholars think there was not much education for women in Athens (and many Greek cultures outside Sparta).
 - There was a group of women, the *hetaure* (ἑταίρα, "companion"), who were a sort of prostitute, but were educated in music, dance, and philosophy because they were expected to be great conversationalists as well as the disreputable elements. One famous *hetaure* is, Aspasia, who was the consort to Pericles and was potentially very influential politically.

The Emergence of Philosophy in Athens

- Greek philosophy is divided into groups: Pre-Socratics, Socrates, Socratics, and Later Schools of Philosophy
- The Pre-Socratics are divided into two groups (by Aristotle): *theologoi* and *physikoi*.
- Those Pre- Socratics who discuss the gods (following the tradition of Hesiod and Homer) are called *theologoi* (θεολόγοι). They were not just theologians but discussed many topics.
- Those Pre-Socratics who do NOT discuss the gods are called the *physikoi* (φυσικοί) or physiologists (φυσιολόγοι). They inquired into nature and are what is typically considered the beginning of philosophy.
 - Thales – Held that water is one principle underlying everything

- Pythagoras – Sought to structure everything by number
- Heraclitus – Tried to understand the world through the apparent flux and change.
- Parmenides – Being is one and change is an illusion
- Empedocles – Everything is between love and strife, might have proposed the 4 Elements (water, earth, air, and fire)
- Democritus – Source for the idea of Atomism
- Some *physikoi* discusses politics and were very critical of the practices of their time. The group known as *sophists* (σοφιστής) emerge from this.
 - The *sophists* had studied nature, but they began to examine ethical and political issues, and especially the art of speaking.
 - Controversy – They taught for pay.
 - Responsible for the advanced study of language and knowledge of grammar.
 - Notable *sophists* (who have a philosophical dimension):
 - Protagoras – Famously said, “man is the measure of all things” and thus, if you are able to persuade another, you become the measure of all things for them.
 - Gorgias – Wrote a work called “On the Nonexistant” and is considered one of the earliest Nihilists although he claimed no to be addressing ethics and was a skillful political negotiator.
 - Thrasymachus – In Plato’s *Republic*, he taught that justice is the advantage of the stronger.
 - Among the *sophists* were historians like Herodotus and Thucydides.
- Socrates – A pivotal figure for western civilization and education.
 - He did NOT teach for pay (distinct from Sophists).
 - Source of the *Socratic Method* of teaching in which teaching occurs through question and answer
- The “Socratics” include Xenophon, Plato, and Aristotle (who discussed the distinction between Plato and Socrates and so can be seen as a student of Socrates but was a student of Plato)

The Academy



Mosaic of Plato's Academy

- Plato taught at The Academy
- The Academy (Ἀκαδημία) was a precinct outside of Athens (containing a grove sacred to Athena and named after the hero Akademos).
- Plato inherited the grove and started to hold discussions there.
- There were no fees, but participation was but invitation only.
- No set curriculum, but might have included lectured and certainly a discussion

- Famous for producing Tyrannicides (people who kill their leader)
- Famous for an obsession with definitions
- Famous for Astronomical discoveries
- Said to have an inscription over the gate saying, “let no one enter here who has not studied geometry.”
- A small number of women may have studied at the Academy
- Aristotle is the most famous student
- It was associated with various schools of thought including skepticism.
- Destroyed after 300 years by the Roman General, Lucius Cornelius Sulla.

The Lyceum

- It was a common place for people to meet and talk even before Aristotle.
- After Plato’s death, governorship of the Academy passed to Plato’s nephew. This displeased Aristotle and he left for Macedonia to tutor Alexander the Great.
- When the Macedonians took over Athens, Aristotle returned and established a school at the Lyceum.
- The administration at the Lyceum included students.
- Aristotle walked around as he taught. His followers were called “peripatetic” (from περιπατητικός, “given to walking around”)
- Alexander reportedly gave Aristotle many plant and animal specimens to study which gave him a huge amount of resources for this study.
- It is said that over the Lyceum were the words, “Let no one enter who has not studied biology.”
- Aristotle oversaw research into all the Greek cities’ constitutions which gave him tremendous resources to study politics.
- Over time, the Lyceum amassed a huge library of information including Aristotle’s works.
- Aristotle left Athens when they turned against the Macedonians so as not to allow them to “sin against philosophy twice” (referring to the death of Socrates in Athens years before).
- Aristotle left the library to his heir Theophrastus. He, in turn, left it to Neleus. When Stator became head of the Lyceum, Neleus left with the library. Thus, the library was not there for a long time. They were eventually returned and the Roman General, Sulla, plundered Aristotle’s library and brought it back to Rome, but many of Aristotle’s works were lost.
- Plato focused on the ethical with less interest in the natural world while Aristotle studied very broadly.



*Aristotle Teaching Alexander the Great
by Charles Laplante*