

300

2007

Director: Zack Snyder

Starring: Gerard Butler, Lena Headey, Rodrigo Santoro

117 minutes - Rated R

By Eric Burnett

Synopsis:

In the 2006 blockbuster *300*, Zack Snyder retells the decisive battle of the Persian War, where 300 Spartans sacrificed their lives to thwart the Xerxes-led Persian army and save Western Civilization. The story picks up after King Leonidas of Sparta murders the Persian ambassador who entered Sparta encouraging surrender. Leonidas then takes his 300 battle-hardened soldiers to cut off the invaders, but after three days of heroic fighting and his betrayal at the hands of scorned hunchback Ephialtes, the Spartan numbers can no longer survive the onslaught. However, before the final Spartan falls, one half-blinded Spartan, Dilios, returns to Greece to tell the story of the brave men, and their sacrifice becomes the inspiration to unite the Greeks and subsequently send the numerically superior Persian force to its final defeat at Platea.

Historically Relevant Scenes

00:01:00>00:05:48	- Agoge
00:06:55>00:13:00	- King Leonidas murders ambassador
00:22:30>00:26:30	- Departing for battle
00:45:20>00:52:00	- Phalanx warfare
01:01:30>01:09:00	- Immortals
01:15:50>01:18:30	- Betrayal of Ephialtes
01:34:30>01:43:30	- Final Battle

Ratings:

Entertainment - ★ ★ ★ ★

Historical Accuracy - ★ ★ ☆ ☆

Historical Analysis:

When *300* first hit the screens, it immediately titillated its target audience - young men drooled at the heroically brutal battle sequences while the ladies exited the theaters drooling for entirely different reasons. Zack Snyder brought to life the vibrant vision of Frank Miller, taking the groundbreaking feel of Miller's *Sin City*, and applying it to one of the most critical events in Western history - the Battle of Thermopylae. Snyder immediately had to deal with criticism as the historical accuracy gurus set to work picking apart his masterpiece. To their criticism, Snyder responded that the film is "an opera, not a documentary" and "the events are 90 percent accurate. It's just in the visualization that it's crazy.... I've shown this movie to world-class historians who have said it's amazing. They can't believe it's as accurate as it is." Regardless of Snyder's admission that his film never intended to be true to history, in the diplomatically charged atmosphere we live in today, a film that pits the underdog Western force of liberty against the oppressive slave-wielding regime of the Persians will undoubtedly be looked at through a hypersensitive lens.

The Spartan's attempt to halt the invading Persian forces took place at the Thermopylae Pass in 480 B.C. In the movie, the Persian army invades Greece as retribution for Spartan King Leonidas' kicking of the Persian ambassador into a well after refusing to surrender because "THIS...IS...SPARTA!!!" In reality, the Persian invasion was anything but spontaneous. The Persian arrival of 480 B.C. came after King Xerxes had spent four years assembling a force that Greek historian Herodotus once numbered at 2.6 million combatants with an accompanying force of an additional 2 million (Recent historians peg the number at closer to 200,000, but regardless, this force had been unprecedented in the history of Mediterranean conflicts).

Xerxes was avenging the defeat of his father Darius, who ten years earlier succumbed to Athenian forces at Marathon (the battle where the Athenian messenger Pheidippides ran 26.2 miles back to Athens to report the climactic victory - he yelled "Nike" and then dropped dead). Darius entered Athens seeking to punish the Athenians for their earlier military support of the Ionians who attempted to break free from the Persian Empire on the landmass that today is known as Turkey. The Athenians felt affinity for these Ionian brothers, as they were once colonists of the expansive Greek empire. Eventually, the Ionians burnt down the Persian city of Sardis. So when Xerxes entered the peninsula of Hellas in 480, he came not to avenge the murder of one of his ambassadors, but to continue the punishment his father failed to inflict, and burn Athens to the ground.

But Xerxes' invasion was stalled by King Leonidas and his army of Spartans at Thermopylae, the only road between Thessaly and northern Greece, a passage known as the "hot gates" (thusly named due to the nearby hot springs). The movie depicts this passage as a narrow, rocky path lodged between a cliff and a water abyss. In reality, it was a narrow pass - probably only about 40 feet wide during the height of Ancient Greece (today, soil deposits have extended its coastal width to over two miles) that was wedged between the 5000 foot Mt. Kallidromon and the Aegean Sea. For any invading army, this was the only way to get through to Athens, and the Spartans knew it. They could negate the Persian numerical advantage by funneling their large numbers into a small front. Regardless of whether an army had 200,000 men or 300 men, only 15-20 could stand shoulder to shoulder at any one time on the narrow pass.

It was here that King Leonidas and his 300 Spartans made their final stand. In the movie, through their ferocity, determination, athleticism and combative skills, the 300 Spartans alone repel wave after wave of Persian advances. However, Sparta did not fight the Persians alone. On the first day, they were joined by over seven thousand other Greeks - among them Thespians, Phocians, and Arcadians. More importantly, their initial success and survival was assured by the role of a man whose importance has been lost through history - Themistocles.

Without Themistocles, there would have been no Battle at Thermopylae and the Persians probably could have conquered Athens and the Greek peninsula with minimal resistance. Born to a merchant and raised on ships, Themistocles rose through the political ranks and survived the first Persian invasion at Marathon. Leaving Marathon, Themistocles realized the key to defeating the Persians was not by expanding the Athenian land army, but by enhancing its navy, because the Persians could only resupply their vast army and hope to maintain an extended land campaign if they controlled the seas. Ironically, at the exact time Themistocles needed money, in 483 BC, vast amounts of silver deposits were discovered to the south of Athens. However, initially Themistocles' appeals to use this money for naval funding fell on deaf ears, and the Athenians were going to merely divide up the profits evenly among each of their citizens (each receiving about ten drachmas, or \$1500 in today's dollars).

Here, Themistocles used his acquired political guile and manufactured a threat from the nearby island city of Aegina. Claiming the Aeginans intended to destroy Athenian maritime commerce, Themistocles secured funding for 100 additional Triremes, the boats that would eventually hold the Persian navy, preventing them from encircling

Leonidas' force. After employing this lie, or a "clever misdirection of the populace to achieve a greater end," Themistocles later coordinated the efforts of Leonidas' land army at Thermopylae and his 270 ships blocking the Artemesium Straits. These 270 ships frustrated and distracted the Persian navy (almost 1000 ships strong), delaying their ability to surround Leonidas' forces. Even when Xerxes attempted to circumvent this Athenian line of defense by sending 200 ships around the Eoëa peninsula, his efforts were foiled by an even more powerful adversary – Mother Nature. As was depicted in the film, a massive storm did in fact strike the Aegean Sea, sinking all 200 ships.

Basically, the 300 Spartans received a lot of help from Themistocles' foresight, 7000 additional soldiers, and a fortuitous squall. However, historians (like film directors) are guilty of the time-honored tradition of exaggerating the role of an underdog force while underplaying the impact of supporting characters, all for the purpose of creating a more engaging tale. And what better tale to tell than that of incredibly overmatched heroes willing to give their lives for their country.

But all 300 Spartans did eventually die. That part can't be denied. After two days of fighting, Xerxes was humiliated that both his light infantry and his elite Immortals had done little damage to the Greek lines. Nearly 20,000 of his men lay dead on the battlefield, with no signs that the Spartans and their fellow Greeks would retreat. It is here that Xerxes tries option C – sending 10,000 of his troops around a "secret" path, thus surrounding the Greek forces. Not all historians agree on how Xerxes came to this knowledge, although some do direct blame to Ephialtes (yes a Greek, but not the revenge-seeking, perverted hunchback from the film).

This maneuver did not surprise King Leonidas. Knowing that the Anopaea Pass was the weak link to the Thermopylae defense, Leonidas stationed 1000 Phocians at the pass to prevent their outflanking of the Greek force. However, when Xerxes army appeared, the Phocians feared that the Persian army intended to attack their nearby city, so they chose to not stand and fight, but return to Phocia and defend their homes. This choice sealed the Spartans fate. Upon learning of the desertion, Leonidas relieved over four thousand Greeks of their duty, whereupon they all returned to their homelands, leaving the 300 Spartans and the 1000 Thespians to hold off Xerxes army of over 200,000.

On the third and final day, director Snyder has King Xerxes approach the battlefield to offer King Leonidas and his men terms of surrender. In the movie, Leonidas then removes his helmet and feigns surrender, only to leap to his feet and heave his spear at the unsuspecting

Xerxes. After the spear cuts his face, Xerxes launches the final attack and within moments King Leonidas and his Spartan warriors fall.

In reality, the only interaction between the Persians and the Greeks that third day came at a nearby stream where a Persian scout came across the Spartans bathing in the nude, combing their hair and taking care of their appearance. The Persians might have seen this as a testament to Greek vanity, but the truth was the Greeks knew this would be their last day and they were preparing for the afterlife. By the end of the day, all Greeks lay dead on the field and Xerxes ordered Leonidas' head to be mounted on a pike.

In the movie, this glorious defeat led to the downfall of Xerxes and his massive force, as the inspired Greek peninsula banded together to thwart the Persian invasion. Although the Battle of Thermopylae did become an Alamo-esque inspiring moment for Greek forces, the true defeat of Persia came not from this assembled force but from the massive Battle at Salamis where 378 Greek ships defeated over 700 Persian ships at a narrow pass (notice how the Persians keep losing at narrow passes?) that neutralized the Persian numerical advantage. It was this defeat, not the assembled land army, that forced Xerxes' withdrawal to resupply the bulk of his army. He did leave behind a smaller army, and this diminished force was defeated by the Greeks, but credit should be given more to the Athenian-led navy than to the Spartan-inspired army.

However, though Snyder and Miller might have exaggerated or downplayed the historical events of the three day battle, at least the major events are semi-grounded in fact. Once you begin to look past the critical military events, you'll begin to realize that Snyder and Miller took extensive liberties to give the audience a film where the flawless protagonists of Greece challenge the horrifically-vile antagonists from Persia. Any vice that might take away from Sparta's idealized status was ignored, as was any historical proof that might glorify the Persian forces.

In the movie, Sparta stands as a democracy, ruled by King Leonidas who reluctantly asks for advice from a council of Ephors, portrayed in the film as lepers. Although Greece was home to the only democracy (Athens) in the Mediterranean world, Sparta was far from a democracy, but more a military dictatorship run by two kings. The yearly elected Council of Ephors balanced the edicts of the two kings, and 37% of the population lived as slaves. Their entire society revolved around manufacturing men capable of combat. Subsequently, the Spartans widely practiced infanticide. On the day of every child's birth a city elder would decide if the child would live or be "exposed" on a hillside and left to die. Miller's creation of the Ephiliates character alludes to the notion

that Sparta only banished the severely deformed, but in reality Spartans killed newborns for abnormalities as minimal as hairlines or birth marks.

Another choice made by the Miller/Snyder team dismissed the role of homosexuality in the Spartan world. In one scene, Leonidas jokingly disparages the Athenians as merely philosophers and "boy lovers" as if the practice of homosexuality was completely foreign to the Spartan male. In reality, Spartans engaged in pederasty, a formal bond between adult male soldiers and their adolescent pupils. In a world that eroticized the male form, even having athletes artistically depicted as nudes, it became natural to base true masculinity on the ability to attract the attention of a male suitor. Society expected the most dominant boys to have secured a lover by the age of twelve for "there was not any of the more hopeful boys who did not have a lover to bear him company."

Although some of these relationships remained chaste (historians such as Plutarch argued that any such behavior was as uncommon as a father molesting a son), others involved sexual relations. Regardless, Sparta did not create these relationships for sexual purposes, but more to militarily bond a youth with his mentor. Because all of the youth's military successes and failures directly reflected upon the worth of the adult mentor, these two developed an intimate relationship in which all skills passed down from teacher to pupil. These intimate relations, some of which involved homosexuality, definitely challenge Miller's depiction of Athenians as the sole practitioners of homosexuality, a condition actually quite common to the Greek world.

Not only could Miller not touch on the homosexual element of Spartan life, he also felt the need to hyper-exaggerate Spartan machismo. These exaggerations prove unnecessary when the real Spartans stood apart from their contemporaries as military machines able to dedicate their lives to defending the state. From the age of seven, Spartan boys began their military training - *agoge* - where they would box, wrestle, swim, run, learn gymnastics and even dance (needed for agility). They suffered through countless hardships - suffering beatings by superiors, surviving winters barefoot in the forest, or spending their every waking moment away from their family. They were given little to eat, encouraged to steal from neighboring villages. Once a year, they were taken in front of the Altar of Orthia Artemis, where they would be beaten bloody, all the while being watched to see if they would cry out in pain. Proud parents stood nearby crying out, "Don't you pass out! Don't you pass out!"

From the moment boys turned seven, Sparta was their only family, and they would defend it to their death. Spartan women needed to be strong, fertile and aggressive, for they would be the bearers of

future Spartans. Mothers dared their boys to be fighting men, and this spirit is embodied by the oft-quoted Spartan mother challenge - "Come back with your shield, or on it." Only two types of Spartans ever had their names engraved on tombs - mothers who died during labor and men that died during battle. Only these two truly gave their life to the state.

Both in real life and in the film, King Leonidas embodies this sacrifice. Although the film plays loose with his agoge experience (he actually would have killed a slave, not a wolf), and his physical depiction (he was probably more a taunt 50 year old than the buffed-out 35 year old played by Gerard Butler), both the fictional and real life versions knew what this battle would mean. Prior to the battle, the Oracle at Delphi had foretold that a man would give his life for Sparta, and Leonidas knew he would be that man. Instead of retreating with the other four thousand Greeks when his fate was essentially sealed, King Leonidas remained on the battlefield, providing a covering force for the retreat, delaying the Persian advance into Greece, and securing for himself historical immortality.

Because of this training, Spartan soldiers became the most formidable fighting force in the Mediterranean. Miller and Snyder took the memory of these historic fighters and repackaged it for today's audience. From their clothing to their weapons to their fighting style, the Spartans seen on screen bare little resemblance to the true fighters. In the film, the men are bare-chested with only metal protection below their knees. They also don capes and lovely little loincloths to become "heroic classical-nude action figures." This recreation allowed the actors to showcase their freshly-formed physiques created courtesy of Mark Twight and his Gym Jones workout regimen. In reality, Spartan soldiers never entered battle with so little protection. True, they exercised and competed naked, but when it came to fighting, they actually realized the benefits of protection. In addition to chest armor (made of strips of leather, linen and bronze) and bronze shinguards, they hung strips of leather from their waist to protect their Spartan jewels, and their tunic covered their thighs to their knees. Also, in the movie, only King Leonidas wears a crested helmet, when in reality all Spartans wanted to look bigger, taller, and more intimidating by wearing crests plumed with horsehair. All Spartan men wore horsehaired helmets, although the officers would have worn their plumes across their helmet instead of from front to back. Their weapon of choice was the *dory*, the six- to nine-foot long spear used for thrusting, and their *xiphos*, the two- to three-foot long sword used only if the spear was to break or if the phalanx broke down.

When it came to fighting, the Spartan style was far more effective than it was entertaining. Audience members nurtured on *Matrix* fight scenes and the theatrics of professional wrestling enthusiastically embraced 300's battle scenes. The movie has the Spartans launch three thrusts against their enemy and then the Spartans break apart to engage in Jackie Chan-Neo-WWE mano y mano street brawls where each Spartan flies through the air while impaling foes or cutting off a variety of appendages. In reality, the Persians weren't such accommodating adversaries, and had a Spartan distanced himself from the pack, he would have died instantly. Spartan survival depended on a uniform attack. Carrying over seventy pounds of armor and weaponry, the front line of the Spartan phalanx would stand their ground while hundreds of their comrades pushed from behind. Those soldiers near the front thrust their spears at any piece of enemy flesh made available. This wasn't sexy, but it was effective. The phalanx made an impenetrable wall, and made it possible to defeat numerically-superior forces.

However, it wasn't Snyder's depiction of Spartan battle techniques or the superiority of Western culture that launched so much criticism of the film. It was the one-sided, demonic depiction of the Persians that so angered segments of the Iranian (modern day Persian) community that the Iran's motion picture board actually lodged a formal complaint to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) for the film's destruction of Iran's heritage. The film presents Xerxes as a sexually deviant "oversized drag queen," a sharp contrast to the macho ideal represented by the Spartan characters. His one million troops come across as monstrous disfigured barbarians, of which even the elite "Immortals" bare daggered teeth hidden behind Kabuki-esque Halloween masks.

Because of this one-dimensional representation of the entire Persian force and their leader, the final battle becomes a conflict between a dedicated, free Western army and an oppressive, barbaric slave-owning regime. Snyder recreated Miller's classic good vs. evil conflict where the victors went on to form the foundation of the superior Western civilization, while the losers retreated to their barbarism, subsequently dooming the Middle East to centuries of subservience to their superior neighbors to the West.

Unfortunately for the xenophobic audience members who need this tale to be true, the reality isn't so tidy. The Persians under the Achaemenid Empire were historically tolerant and bestowed upon the world a human rights legacy unprecedented at the time. From Cyrus the Great onward, the Persian Empire created a bill of rights, while granting

freedoms to women not seen elsewhere in the West. Cyrus, grandfather of Xerxes, proclaimed over 2500 years ago:

“I will respect the traditions, customs and religions of the nations of my empire and never let any of my governors and subordinates look down on or insult them while I am alive. ...I will impose my monarchy on no nation. Each is free to accept it, and if any one of them rejects it, I never resolve on war to reign. While I am the king...I will never let anyone oppress others... I will never let anyone take possession of movable and landed properties of the others by force or without compensation. While I am alive, I will prevent unpaid, forced labour. Today, I announce that everyone is free to choose a religion...No one could be penalised for his or her relatives' faults...”

This declaration dealt with land claims, religious affiliation, women's rights, meritocracy, and personal freedoms. Although many historians trace the American Bill of Rights to English tradition or even Athenian democracy, in reality, one needs look further back to Persia, where the notion of individual freedoms was first protected by a political leader. And unlike the perception of Iran and the Middle East today, the Persia of Cyrus and Xerxes' time was highly tolerant of religions, and Cyrus the Great was responsible for releasing the Jews from their Babylonian Captivity. As for the Persians being slaveholders, no archaeological evidence exists to prove widespread acceptance of slavery, and in fact the Persian Empire became the "Promised Land" for slaves escaping captivity in Northern Africa and the Middle East. This is not to say that the Persian Empire was free of violence, corruption and inhumane treatment, but to say they were any more uncivilized than the rest of the classic world is an historical inaccuracy. As for much-maligned Xerxes, he was actually a bearded, heterosexual emperor married to Esther (a leading advocate for Jewish freedoms) - a far cry from the effeminate, ten-foot tall, body pierced beast that greets Leonidas in the film.

Why then has recent history depicted the Persian Empire in such a negative light? Much of this portrayal can be traced back to the Greek historian Herodotus, from whom much of our knowledge of early Greece comes. Prior to the 1850s, the primary historical texts (the Bible and the work of Greek author Xenophon) championed the role of Cyrus the Great and the Persian Empires, but toward the middle of the nineteenth century, Western historians felt the need to devalue the importance of monarchical rule. As the United States and France emerged triumphantly from imperial control, historians sought out historical interpretations that

glorified the role of democracy. Enter Herodotus. His texts presented the Greeks in such a light - underdogs fighting insurmountable numbers, armed not only with determination and undying effort, but with firmly engrained democratic values leading their every movement. Since this time, future historians have followed this Eurocentric model established by the "Father of History" and subsequent Western texts have veered little from his analysis. Ironically, Herodotus, the champion of everything Greek, chose the Persian Empire to live, write and publish his texts, for it was here that he was granted the artistic freedom to express his views without fear of retribution.

Many point to the Battle of Thermopylae as the beginning of Western Civilization. The Persian invasion and subsequent burning of Athens forced the Greek city-states to unite and abandon their centuries-long tradition of infighting. The subsequent alliance known as the Delian League brought great riches to Athens, creating an unprecedented flowering of culture that produced some of the West's greatest philosophers, political thinkers, playwrights, artists, poets, scientists and historians. When Philip II later came down from Macedonia and united all the remaining city-states under the banner of Greece, he had created the beginnings of an empire that his son, Alexander the Great, would one day share with the entire known world.

However, some might argue that this exchange of ideas could have happened regardless, and earlier, with less carnage and without the legacy of East/West tension. Would not the Persians have been equally accommodating to the Athenians as they were to the other regions under their realm? Would not the flowering of Greek culture been shared with the Persian world nearly two centuries before the campaigns of Alexander the Great? And how would have Eastern/Western relations developed had the Persians controlled Eastern Europe through antiquity? Before hastily dismissing these oversimplified hypothetical scenarios, maybe the audience should reconsider that the Persian Empire truly wasn't the domain of demonic barbarians depicted in the film *300*, and just because Western Civilization went on to such great heights after Thermopylae, does not mean that Thermopylae alone and the subsequent repulsion of the Persian invasion sparked the dominance of the Western world.

300 is an exceptionally entertaining film, but also an extremely important film to analyze objectively. Because director Zack Snyder and graphic novelist Frank Miller created a tale that so obviously distorts the historical accuracy of both the protagonists and antagonists, it stands as a perfect example of how Hollywood manipulates history to satisfy the box office reliance on a good guy/bad guy conflict. Instead of condemning

the film, historical advocates should recommend it. Its alterations are easy to recognize, as are its creator's motivations. Only by learning from such over the top films as *300* can an average filmgoer begin to learn the "tricks of the trade," thus enabling them to be cognizant of the less obvious alterations that exist in all Hollywood historical films.

Key Quotes

Persian Messenger: (*challenging Queen Gorgo*) What makes this woman think she can speak among men?

Queen Gorgo: Because only Spartan women give birth to real men.

King Leonidas: (*after Persian ambassador requests Spartan surrender*) You bring the crowns and heads of conquered kings to my city steps. You insult my queen. You threaten my people with slavery and death! Oh, I've chosen my words carefully, Persian. Perhaps you should have done the same!

Persian Messenger: This is blasphemy! This is madness!

King Leonidas: Madness...? THIS... IS... SPARTA!

King Leonidas: (*preparing for the final battle*) Spartans! Ready your breakfast and eat hearty... For tonight, we dine in hell!

King Leonidas: (*predicting the battle's impact*) The world will know that free men stood against a tyrant, that few stood against many, and that before this battle is over, even a god-king can bleed.

Persian: (*threatening Spartans with annihilation*) A thousand nations of the Persian empire descend upon you. Our arrows will blot out the sun!

Stelios: Then we will fight in the shade.

Dilios: (*discussing the legacy of the Spartan sacrifice at the Battle of Thermopylae*) Long I pondered my king's cryptic talk of victory, but time has proven him wise, for from free Greek to free Greek, the word was spread that bold Leonidas and his 300, so far from home, laid down their lives... not just for Sparta, but for all Greece and the promise this country holds. Now here on this ragged patch of earth called Plateaea, let his hordes face obliteration!