

**Go Tell the Spartans:
How the 300 Misrepresents Persians in History**

Touraj Daryaee
California State University, Fullerton

What do you get when you take all the “misfits” that inhabit the collective psyche of the white American establishment and put them together in the form of a cartoonish invading army from the East coming to take your freedom away? Then add a horde of Black people, deformed humans who are the quintessential opposite of the fashion journal images, a bunch of veiled towel-heads who remind us of Iraqi insurgents, a group of black cloaked Ninja-esque warriors who look like Taliban trainees, and men and women with body and facial piercings who are either angry, irrational, or sexually deviant. All this headed by a homosexual king (Xerxes) who leads this motley but vast group of “slaves” known as the Persian army against the 300 handsomely sculpted men of Sparta who appear to have been going to LA (or Montreal) gyms devotedly, who fight for freedom and their way of life, and who at times look like the Marine Corps advertisements on TV? You get the movie “300.”

It is these insinuations in the film that are more troublesome to me as a Persian immigrant to the U.S., than as a historian of antiquity. After all, Hollywood tries to sell movies and does not care if they are historically accurate, but movies also carry a subtle message which has very effective and current consequences. Some passages from the Classical authors Aeschylus, Diodorus, Herodotus and Plutarch are spilt over the movie to give it an authentic flavor. Aeschylus becomes a major source when the battle with the “monstrous human herd” of the Persians is narrated in the film. Diodorus’ statement about Greek valor to preserve their liberty is inserted in the film, but his mention of Persian valor is omitted. Herodotus’ fanciful numbers are used to populate the Persian army, and Plutarch’s discussion of Greek women, specifically Spartan women, is inserted

wrongly in the dialogue between the “misogynist” Persian ambassador and the Spartan king. Classical sources are certainly used, but exactly in all the wrong places, or quite naively. However, my response is not so much to the inaccuracies of the film, but rather to its ultimate motive and its possible use in the current issue of war on terrorism.

The movie begins by showing an idyllic Sparta, where women go about freely, children play in safety, and become real men by going through the *agoge* system, as our movie hero King Leonidas does. From the distance an African-looking man with piercings all over his body appears with the head of the king who had the audacity of resisting Xerxes, the Persian ruler. There are some haphazard exchanges between King Leonidas and the Persian ambassador, who looks like a science fiction freak monster with his Al-Qaida entourage behind him. The king’s wife dares to talk and invokes the passage from Plutarch on women in Sparta “We are the mothers of men...” to the freakish, body-pierced bully who is the Persian ambassador, and a number of slogans about freedom, faith, etc. which sound like they came from Fox News or the Bush Administration, are spouted through King Leonidas. The sentence “We are the mothers of men” was actually never said to the Persians in history, but rather was part of a completely Greek debate on the position of women, regarding the fact that Athenian women were forced to stay in the *andron* (inner sanctum of the house) so that their reputations would not be tarnished. Spartan women were different than the Athenian women, but Persian women of this period had more freedoms than either the Spartans or Athenians and interceded not only in political matters, but also joined with the army, owned property, and ran businesses. The only time Persian women are shown in the film is as the usual fanciful Odaliskic Oriental women who do nothing but crawl on the ground, perform sexual acrobatics to fool the Western man, or just swarm around the water-pipe, high and happy.

So King Leonidas represents the fearless king who wants to keep Sparta “free” and to preserve “their way of life” and “democracy.” These mantras are repeated throughout the film. Even though the Spartan *Gerousia* (Congress) does not want to declare war, only King Leonidas knows what is needed and he makes the unilateral decision that he and his 300 Spartan men must go to battle for truth, justice and the Spartan way. I don’t think I

was the only one who by the end of the film had a sense that Leonidas was a bit like President Bush and that the *Gerousia* was a bit like our U.S. Congress. But I am sure this is a coincidence since President Bush has himself never fought a war and since he will retire soon to have an airport or library named after him. But, on the other hand, King Leonidas lays down his life for the mantras that slavishly emanate from Bush's official pulpit (Fox News) and other media outlets since the tragedy of September 11, 2001. So perhaps it is correct to equate the Persians of "300" with some of our enemies today, the Iranians, and King Leonidas with our war hero, *i.e.*, President Bush.

Another side note to this battle is the clear identification of the Eastern Oriental Persian army with the Muslims, almost taken from Medieval imagery of the Moors who attacked Europe. They are dark, have head covers, and are very angry and disorganized. On the other hand the great general of Leonidas who receives continual praise from his king bears an uncanny resemblance to the Jesus in Franco Zeffirelli's landmark "Jesus of Nazareth" and even experiences Christ-like suffering. Thus Bush, with Jesus at his side, defends Western Civilization against the Eastern Islamic-esque army who are coming to invade the West and take away our freedoms.

The Persian ambassador/Al-Qaida agent is killed in Sparta and so war begins and the Persians make plans to take away Spartan women, children, and freedoms. King Leonidas is not going to let this happen so he takes his elite fighting force to the pass of Thermopylae to stand against the million man slave-army of the kingdom of Persia. The Spartan fighting men very much act and sound like the U.S. Marine Corps with their slogans and their growls. Of course, this is only a coincidence. Then appears the powerful and homoerotic King Xerxes who first tries to deal with the Spartans by sending a conveniently stereotypical angry, fat Black man to brandish his whip at them. Then comes the almost baboonish Persian army, composed of monsters who cannot speak (another way of identifying the Persians as barbarians, *i.e.*, the Greek name for those whose language is unintelligible). Although they resemble Iraqi insurgents, cinematic events unfold differently than they have in President Bush's Iraq: the 300 Spartans kill thousands of the enemies of freedom without receiving so much as a scratch.

The battle between the outnumbered Spartans and their Persian enemies took place at the pass of Thermopylae in the year 480 BCE. In the movie version, the Spartan warriors kill the Persian soldiers without any losses until one wave of the Persian forces begin throwing fanciful explosives that shoot shrapnel into the chiseled physiques of our Greek “heroes.” Are we to believe that the Improvised Explosive Devices which are killing our soldiers in Iraq, and which the Bush/Leonidas administration claims to be manufactured by the Iranians/Persians (Iran was called Persia until an official name change in 1935), can suddenly appear on a fifth century BCE battle field?

Along with the IEDs, the doom of our Hellenic heroes is encompassed by a deformed half-Spartan who turns traitor and shows the Persians the backdoor route which results in the entrapment of the Greeks. Although King Xerxes comes one last time to convince the freedom-loving Leonidas to surrender, and even tempts him with the whole of Greece just for giving his obedience to the Persians, our hero does not give in. In an almost sexual gesture Xerxes holds Leonidas from the back and asks him to submit, to bend before the Persian ruler. The king goes into a dream (lifted from the Russell Crow film *Gladiator*) about his wife, child, and city, raises the battle cry, and then dies along with his entire regiment while the Spartan Congress, crippled by bribery and backstabbing, debates whether or not to send aid.

One Spartan survivor is sent back to tell the story and so the heroism of the 300 Spartans who fought a hopeless battle against the overwhelming Persian slave army is remembered for posterity. This event galvanizes Greece into a unified force that can withstand the Persians (although unity soon dissolved into the Greek civil conflict known as the Peloponnesian Wars), and defeat them at the battle of Salamis (although Athens was sacked and burnt). The moral of the story is that 300 men sacrificed their lives for freedom, their way of life, and Democracy, something echoes in today’s broadcast updates on the war against so-called Islamic terrorism. Again, another coincidence.

But let us address the historicity of the film and the way in which the film uses history to mount a defense of “Western Civilization” against the invading “Other.” The reasoning for King Xerxes’ invasion of the continent of Europe is never discussed in the movie, and is rarely mentioned in the West. This is because accuracy is sacrificed in order to manipulate ancient history to buttress the Western view of the world. The borders of the Persian empire stretched from the Indus and Oxus Rivers in the East, to the Mediterranean Sea in the West, extending through Anatolia (modern day Turkey) and Egypt. This way the rivers and the seas were to provide a natural defense. But one of the cities along the coast of Anatolia, Miletus, ruled by a Greek tyrant named Aristagoras in 499 BCE staged a revolt and turned to the Athenians for aid. Until then the Persians had no plan or desire to go into Europe. The tiny Greek archipelago was probably almost beneath the notice of the Persian king. But then an Athenian attack on a major Persian province, which culminated in the sacking and burning of the city of Sardis, naturally alarmed the Persians. It is *this* destructive event that started what is known as the Greco-Persian Wars. It was *not* an unprovoked Persian invasion of Greece. Nor did Aristagoras start this trouble for “freedom” or “democracy,” but rather as step in his intrigue to take control of another Greek city (Naxos) on the Anatolian coast. The Athenians did not bring freedom or democracy to Sardis either. It was burnt and looted. So much so for the cause. In 494 BCE the Persians soundly defeated the Greek forces at the battle of Lade, and the coast of Anatolia was once again peaceful. Of course most of these preliminary events are of no significance today in the West and the subsequent battle between Xerxes and the Greeks is taken out of context, manipulated, and the freedom-loving, democratic Greeks are set against the slave empire of Achaemenid Persia. Is this is a fair and balanced view of history?

The result of these events was that the revolt started by Aristagoras was stopped by the Persians, the Athenian forces retreated, and then the Spartans and others were the defeated at Thermopylae. Luck was with the Greeks since in the subsequent battle of Salamis they gained the upper hand. However, Athens was sacked and burnt for its indiscretion at Sardis in 480 BCE. But if you read any history book in the West, none of these events really are highlighted, and only the Persian defeats are emphasized and such

modern mantras as “freedom” and “democracy” are projected into the past onto ancient warfare.

Such jargon relating to “freedom” and “democracy” as used in the movie “300” is utterly untrue and exactly the opposite of what is revealed in the historical sources. It was not the Persians who were the slave nation. In fact the Persians allowed the different peoples of their empire to carry on their lives and traditions as they liked. Thus, the ancient city of Babylonia and the Greek-speaking settlements on the coast of Anatolia continued to use slaves, but in general the Persians hired people and paid them regardless of sex or ethnicity. This is made amply clear by the cuneiform documents from Persepolis, the capital of Achaemenid Persia. There were Persian women supervisors who controlled various economic activities in the sixth and fifth centuries BCE. Such women were granted a stipend for the support of their children and even given maternity leave. We find none of this in Greece. But in “300” we hear the “we are the mothers of men” quote, out of context, as if it applies to Persian ideas about the low status of women.

In the “freedom”-loving and “democratic” Sparta, slaves called *hēlots* were owned communally and there was an annual festival during which young Spartan men were allowed to terrorize the slave population and even kill a few of them to remind the rest of their place. And Sparta was not a democracy. It was a militaristic monarchy with a council of elders which decided political matters, but it was not a democracy. It was constantly on the warpath and constantly attempting to control and enslave its neighboring Greek city-states. Likewise, “democratic” Athens did not behave any better after it became the Hegemon in the fifth century BCE and began enslaving its neighbors, taking their lands, and destroying their way of life. Democracy (literally, rule by the people, Greek *demos*) was but a brief experiment in Greek history. Some estimates suggest that even when Greek democracy was at its height in 431 BC, less than 14% of the members of this society were allowed to participate in this “government by the people.” Not only was the vast majority of the population, including women, excluded from policy making, but nearly 37% lived in actual slavery. In contrast those who joined

the Persian army, which included many non-hunchbacked Greeks, were paid for their service!

In the film “300” there is a constant reiteration that only 300 fought against two million, of which probably one million died in the course of the film. In reality the “freedom”-loving Spartans used slaves along with free “citizen-soldiers,” while the Persians employed paid forces and no slaves. The battle of Thermopylae (480 BCE) has been recorded as the last stand of 300 Spartans who died to the very last man to protect free Greece, which is a myth happily held up by the modern West as a symbol of resistance against the East. In fact, each of the Spartans had seven slaves (the same *hēlots* mentioned above, who also fought to the death) with him in battle, bringing the total to 2400, plus another 2,000 non-Spartan Greeks (Thespians and Lacedaemonians) who also died. Some estimates put the Greek forces at Thermopylae as high as 7,000. The Persian force was not in the millions. An ancient army could never have mustered so many people, even if the Persians had resorted to slavery. But of course 300 against millions sounds much better than thousands of Spartans against thousands of Persians.

In the end, what is most troubling is the timing of the film’s premier. The fight between the Greeks and Persians, two civilizations representing the West and East, is screened in many movie theaters just when the U.S. and Iran are facing off in a bitter battle of words and ideologies. The two countries claiming descent from these two ancient peoples. On the one hand the movie Persians are shown as the representation of all that is alien and distasteful to the white Western life. Then there is the added ingredient of Black people, homosexuals, pierced and tattooed people, who in many way represent the archetypal outcasts in the collective imagination of middle America. And on the other hand there are the beautifully sculpted men who are moral, righteous, and willing to die together for freedom and Democracy. They obviously represent Western values.

In a time when we hear the sirens of war over Iran (Persia), it is ominous that such a film as “300” is released for mass consumption. To depict Persians / Iranians as inarticulate monsters, raging towards the West, trying to rob its people of their basic values demeans

the population of Iran and anesthetizes the American population to war in the Middle East. This way Bush, Cheney, and other “compassionate” conservatives can more easily rain their precision guided missiles down on the heads of my parents, family members and other Iranians, establish Abu Ghraib detention centers, and perhaps take revenge for the death of the 300 Spartans in antiquity and finally bring democracy, peace and a better way of life to the East. Iraq was such a success, now the Spartan Marines need to head out to Iran and destroy it in order to protect our American freedoms. The fantasy movie “300” is just another of the propagandistic tools to reiterate this preposterous belief and to get the American people, children and adults, ready to endorse another Shock and Awe operation. I am saddened that we never seem to learn from history!



Dr. Touraj Daryaee
Professor of Ancient and Late Antique History
California State University, Fullerton
tdaryaee@fullerton.edu
www.tourajdaryaee.com