

300 and the Real Battle of Thermopyla

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The cinematic story of 300 elite Spartan warriors fighting side by side against a million Persians to protect freedom and democracy for the Western World has been around forever. The story has inspired several movies from the 1962 film “*The 300 Spartans*” to “*300*”, the 2006 box office smash hit by Zack Snyder which itself was based off Frank Miller’s 1992 comic series of the same name. The story is based on some historical truth. There really was a battle of Thermopylae in 480 BC that involved an outnumbered Greek army that had Spartan against an invading Persian force; however, the amount of people involved and why they were fighting have been heavily distorted and dramatized for entertainment. Unfortunately, this version has become so popular that most people do not know how inaccurate it is. In this essay, I will separate the myths and the facts about the epic battle. I will show you how the numbers involved on both sides have been distorted to push a narrative and how the values of both sides have been misrepresented to falsely push moral superiority. It is important to understand the real events of what happened so that we are not misrepresenting history.

In 480 BC, the Persian army was advancing towards the heart of Greece. Spartan King Leonidas marched north to Thermopylae to hold them off at a natural choke point, known as the “Hot Gates”. If your information came from any of the many movies or books about the subject, this is usually where they stop basing the story in facts. All the stories claim King Leonidas led a force of just 300 Spartan Warriors to the Hot Gates to make a stand against the advancing army. The actual number under Leonidas’ command is debated; however, all sources claim the number to be in the thousands. 5-10 thousand men (about the seating capacity of a basketball stadium) (Seaver, 2023) from Sparta and many other Greek city-states is the realistic number. (Kleist, 2008). An error that large seems to be hard to make; however, the original source on this goes back to Greek scholars who are known to be biased towards their own interests. It is likely that

the numbers were dramatized to make the Greek force who fought for 3 days without giving up their position even more impressive.

The movies that have been made are always insistent that the Persian invaders were stupid, barbaric, uncivilized, and even portrayed some of them as deformed. This could not be further from the truth. In many ways the Persian society was more civilized and better educated than the average Greek resident (Paul Cartledge, 2020). Beyond that, Greek culture valued women much less than the Persian invaders. A woman in Greece at the time would not be equal to a man and would not have as many rights. In Persia, women were treated significantly better and would enjoy many of the same rights as men. Greece at the time was still practicing slavery with massive number of slaves forced to farm and perform labor, many of them captured from defeated enemy forces. In contrast the Persian empire had rules against slavery with religious text outlawing it. Persian kings on more than one occasion attempted to get all slaves free that were in the empire. Evidence suggest that slavery did still happen just to a much smaller degree than Greece during the time.

Another common belief in recent years that has become even more widespread is that the Greek army was fighting to keep the western world free and protect democracy. This misconception has become so popular that the Spartan helmet and chevron is a popular right-wing emblem for nationalism. The Spartans did not believe in democracy; they opposed it and even wanted to separate from the rest of Greece. Greece at the time had not only one King but two, and they operated as Diarchy. Both came from rich aristocrat families. Greece had 28 officials in the senate that served for life, the kings included (Cartledge, 2020). The Greeks believed in democracy only for themselves and certainly not for the many slaves in their empire or any other people they conquered. The Greeks were fighting for freedom for themselves. They wished to be free from the rule of a king they did not know.

The idea that Persian forces numbered in the range of 1 million fighting is highly unlikely. Most estimates put the Persian army around 70,000 strong with some outliers claiming 100,000. (Kleist, 2008). This idea of such a large invading army may be more bias from scholars during the time trying to claim the enemy force needed to defeat a Greek army would need to be ludicrously large. The practice of Greeks wildly inflating the numbers of the army's they face is common throughout their history. Many famous examples exist of leaders claiming to have wiped out enemy forces that vastly outnumbered them with ease. (Walsh, 2020). Julius Caesar famously authored a book about his war in the Gallic where he takes this to the extreme. He, as well as other Greeks, write their history as they please and usually try to make their military knowledge and leadership skills sound as good as they can. This is a fantastic way to claim to win battles against a numerically superior enemy. Another way would be to claim the force that did best you in battle was vastly larger than it may have really been. It is likely the Greeks did not want their perceived military superiority questioned when it came out that they lost a battle. Therefore, they spread the claim that they were so outnumbered that they could have never won the fight, yet they still held off a million soldiers for multiple days before fighting to the last man.

An iconic image that comes to mind when thinking of the battle of Thermopylae or the “300” series is of a Spartan warrior carrying a shield and spear with a helmet on and no other Armour to protect them. The movies would have you believe the only protection Spartans had for their body from the neck down was pure muscles. This is another silly idea. The people that fought were mostly hoplites who wore heavy armor, including breast plates that protected the chest and back, grieves to protect the legs, and helmets. The armor would have been made from materials such as hardened linen, leather, or bronze. Bronze armor would offer the most protection but weigh the most (Sabin et al., 2007). Weight would not have been a large concern

when fighting in the phalanx formation as they did because it kept them stationary. This idea of almost naked warriors is a more modern creation as the soldiers featured in the 1962 film, while not accurately depicting the number of people, did at least keep them in realistic armor. Frank Miller, the writer, and artist of the comic “300” that the movie series is based on, seems to have created this misconception that has not taken over. Ever since he drew Spartan soldiers wearing nothing but a helmet, cape, and underwear in 1992 the average person would be surprised to learn that Spartans had impressive armor at that time. Why this choice was made is not clear, but it was certainly a popular decision as every Halloween a Spartan costume will depict this fictional armor and not the accurate thing.

After reading this essay, I hope you can still enjoy the great movies and books that the Battle of Thermopylae inspired as well as recognize that they are not historically accurate. There were several thousand more warriors than just 300 and the invading army was not a million strong. It is much more likely to have been less than 100,000 Persian fighters. The Spartans were not fighting to save democracy and freedom; they did not support democracy and certainly did not believe people should be free as they owned vast amounts of slaves. I learned a lot about Greek culture and history while researching for this essay. I knew of the movies, which I do enjoy though not historically accurate, but I did not know how many creative liberties were made. While the Battle of Thermopylae is a very impressive final stand that would have made an excellent movie, even if told to perfect historical accuracy, it is not like the pop culture stories that the media pushes. I hope the next time you watch the movie “300” or read the comic you can still enjoy it as well as look at it from a new angle.

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