

Greek History on Screen: *The 300 Spartans* (1962)

Introduction

While the output of films depicting Greek historical events is considerably smaller than films about Rome, both Greek and Roman historical films share a number of features. Like the history of Rome, we only ever see small slivers of the history of Greece in cinema. Greek historical films tend to stick to a very limited series of events and narratives, largely the Persian Wars and Alexander the Great. Just as in the case of Roman historical films, Greek historical narratives are rarely complete enough to sustain an entire film without the addition of a number of fictional elements and subplots. Yet while historical films about Greece and Rome confront similar issues, there are also a number of features unique to Greek history and culture that pose particular problems for filmmakers. The small number of Greek historical films is not simply a by-product of a lack of interest in Greek history. Less than six months after the release of *The 300 Spartans*, Rex Warner's biography of the Athenian statesman Pericles would prove to be a bestseller. Rather, there is a genre-specific problem. For various reasons, Greek history is not an easy subject for the filmmaker. An examination of these particular issues is illuminating both about the nature of Greek culture and the pressures that operate on cinema.

Historical sources are always a problem for Greek history, particularly for its earliest periods. The line between history and myth is all too easily blurred. The ancient Greeks believed that they lived in a world where fantastic creatures still existed and that the marks of heroes of the previous age remained visible in the landscape. Indeed, in the fifth century BC, a general could plausibly claim to have discovered the bones of the Athenian hero Theseus and could take them in procession through the city for all to see. As a result, standard accounts of early Greek history all too often include supernatural elements that preclude them from being used as the basis for historical films. These accounts may have been 'history' to the Greeks, but are unrecognisable as such to us.

There were, of course, sceptical rationalising movements in Greece who attempted to remove or explain away such fantastic accounts about the past. Critics, such as the fourth-century BC intellectual Euhemerus, made their reputation by debunking myths and proposing alternative accounts

that explained the gods and heroes as just great men who over time had mistakenly had fantastic stories attributed to them (this technique of seeking a historical core behind mythic stories is known today as 'Euhemerism'). However, no complete alternative rationalist account of early Greek history survives. Instead, we have only fragments and passing comments. The rationalist historian Thucydides, for example, observes that Agamemnon's invasion of Troy probably had more to do with politics than the abduction of Helen (1.9.1), but he fails to expand on this idea to present an alternative account of the Trojan War. So while Thucydides provides precisely the type of rationalist frame that David Benioff was looking for when producing his script for *Troy* (2004), Benioff was left to his own devices to construct a version of the Trojan story that removed all references to the intervention of the gods or the supernatural.

Even when Greek historians write accounts of contemporary events that have minimal supernatural elements, there are still problems in transforming these narratives into film. Historical films are almost always a species of epic film and as such are limited by the same commercial pressures. They need to play to large audiences in order to be successful. This creates problems when there is a necessity to present difficult and unfamiliar material. We have already seen the problems that this causes for the cinematic depiction of the complicated intrigues of the late Roman republic. The problem is intensified for Greece.

Through a combination of topography, patterns of settlement, and historical circumstances, the geo-political landscape of Greece is exceedingly complex. Ancient Greece consisted of a patchwork of small, independent city-states each with their own laws, customs, and systems of government. Even in the period of the comparatively simple bi-polar politics of the mid-to-late fifth century BC when much of the Greek world divided in allegiance to either Sparta or Athens, there are still complicating factors. City-states swap sides in allegiance, each ally seems to have a different agenda and motivation. Telling simple stories about this period is difficult. Unfamiliar names and places all too easily pile up. Audiences may have heard of Corinth, but Phocis? When the city appears in *The 300 Spartans*, tellingly the speaker has to introduce his city as 'a small state, able to field only a thousand soldiers'. This could hardly have come as a surprise to the delegates at Corinth, and is purely for the cinema audience's benefit. Despite its size, Phocis is an important city historically. It is impossible to give an historical account of the background to the start of the Peloponnesian War or the rise of Philip of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great, without mentioning Phocis. Yet Phocis is one of many such players and there are only so many times that films can stop and explain details.

Greek history is also complicated ethically as well as politically. The classical period of Greek history, the period most familiar to mainstream cinema audiences, is dominated by the Peloponnesian War, the war be-

tween Athens and Sparta. Yet this is a conflict that doesn't lend itself to easy ethical judgments. Neither side is completely in the right or the wrong. Arguably Athens, the city with which modern democratic societies sympathise as the first democracy, comes across in a worse light in the campaign. Her belligerence was one of the principal causes of the war. The empire that she was defending was a far from admirable institution. Athens treated her allies brutally. She behaved badly during the war, massacring, for example, the citizens on the neutral island of Melos. Counter-intuitively, it is militaristic Sparta that does most for the cause of Greek freedom in this campaign.

If Greek interstate politics is ethically complicated, so too are its interpersonal politics. As has been observed before, it is striking how important the opposition between Christian and pagan proves in orientating storylines and providing character motivations for films set in antiquity. Stories set in Greece are deprived of this organising dichotomy. What motivates 'good girls' to be 'good'? As Gideon Nisbet observes, films set in Greece can never have the frisson of repressed sexual desire that we find in Roman films: 'If *he* is pagan and likes girls, and if *she* is pagan and likes boys, why don't they spend the whole movie in bed?' (Nisbet 2006: 23). When Ellas tells Phylon in *The 300 Spartans* that they must resist their love and 'be strong', the audience is perfectly entitled to ask, as Phylon does, 'why?'. Her request to Phylon in reply that he remember that 'once the rain has fallen, nothing can put it back into the sky' seems extraordinarily coy and anachronistic. Furthermore, as Nisbet's statement implies, there are other considerations that apply particularly in Greece. Our pagan boy may also fancy other boys.

In the discussion of *Spartacus*, we raised the issue of homosexuality in Rome. The problem is only compounded in Greece whose reputation for homosexuality was such that even the Romans used the term 'Greek love' to refer to pederasty. Even if a film decides to ignore the issue, widespread knowledge about Greek homosexuality ensures that every sign of male intimacy and friendship is potentially miscoded. For example, *300* (2007) represses almost all references to the institutionalised homosexual relationships that existed between older and younger Spartans. However, that didn't stop many critics from seeing something deeply homoerotic in its endless displays of buff male Spartan bodies. As Todd McCarthy put it in his review of *300*, 'nowhere outside of gay porn have so many broad shoulders, bulging biceps and ripped torsos been seen onscreen as in *300*' (*Variety* 9/3/2007). This latent homosexuality was ruthlessly exploited by the *300* parody, *Meet the Spartans* (2008) where the closeted homosexuality of the Spartan king Leonidas operates as a running joke throughout the film.

Having seen the pitfalls, it is worth observing what films do with Greek history to tell their story. One obvious technique is to avoid too much historical detail or complexity. *The Giant of Marathon* (Italian title: *La*

battaglia di Maratona, 1959) provides an extreme example. Arguably calling this film 'historical' is a travesty of the term. *The Giant of Marathon* presents a version of the story of the battle of Marathon as refracted through the lens of peplum cinema. Steve Reeves (*Hercules*, *Hercules Unchained*, *Dual of the Titans*, etc.) plays the Olympic athlete and leader of the Athenian Sacred Guard, Philippiades, whilst opposite him playing his love interest, Andromeda, is Mylène Demongeot (*Romulus and the Sabines*). The historical errors in the film are legion. The Persian fleet were not equipped with ships with giant mechanical jaws, the Sacred Guard which Reeves supposedly commands is a fiction, Athens was never betrayed by a traitor called Theocritus. Such a list could be extended endlessly. Yet despite this, the key narrative arc of the battle of Marathon is retained. The film captures well the political situation of Athens at the time. Her nervousness about the possible overthrow of democracy by the Persians and the reinstatement of the deposed tyrant Hippias rings true. The famous runs between Sparta and Athens and between the Marathon plain and the Athenian city centre are included. The film cleverly exploits the little discussed Persian fleet's attempted attack on Athens following the Persian defeat at Marathon, turning this minor historical event into an underwater battle spectacular. Even the name Philippiades is not without authority. Most accounts give the name of the Marathon runner as Pheidippides, but the film follows Herodotus in its naming of the hero.

Jettisoning inconvenient history and replacing it with cinematic clichés is one option. Quasi-historical films such as *Damon and Pythias* (1962) and even more *Colossus of Rhodes* (1961) belong to this tradition. Another technique is to avoid telling any grand political story and focus instead on the personal. In this, Greek history is fortunate to have a personality large enough to support an entire film, Alexander the Great. There have been two mainstream films based on the life of Alexander, Robert Rossen's *Alexander the Great* (1956) and Oliver Stone's *Alexander* (2004).

Both films have been praised for their historical accuracy. The pressbooks for Robert Rossen's *Alexander the Great* gush about the amount of research that Rossen put into his film, boasting that he 'painstakingly read through all those ancient writers who speak of Alexander'. We should expect such claims from pressbooks, but they have been followed by critics, with the film having been described as 'one of the most historically faithful of all movies about the ancient world' (Solomon 2001: 42). Similar claims were made about Stone's *Alexander* (2004); in this case perhaps with even more reason. Stone had the benefit of a number of historical advisors, most notably the leading Greek historian, Robin Lane Fox as well as academic advice from Fiona Greenland and Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones. Not only is the plot for the film grounded firmly in the ancient sources, but so are most of the props, costumes, and interior and exterior scenery. Huge amounts of time, money, and research were expended to ensure that every detail was as accurate as possible.

Intriguingly neither film is regarded as a great success. Both suffered at the box-office and critical praise for both films is thin on the ground. Rossen's *Alexander the Great* is regarded as one of his least successful films. Stone's film received almost universally negative reviews for being tedious. Shooting the life of Alexander the Great turns out to be harder than it looks. In many ways, the problems with *Alexander* are emblematic of filming Greek historical stories in general. The historical accounts fit awkwardly into the cinematic frame. These are stories made for biographies or multi-volume histories, not feature-length films. Stone cut out a number of battles from his *Alexander*, but that couldn't stop one critic from grumbling 'short life, long movie' (Clark cited in Cyrino 2010: 169). The tensions between grand abstract historical narratives and engaging personal stories keep threatening to overturn the project. Compounding the problem is the alienness of the environment. It appears to be more difficult to feel at home in Greece than it is in Rome.

Background to case study

Midway through the debate about how Greece should respond to the Persian invasion, the leader of the opposition to fighting against Persia gets up and shouts 'We have no time for history now, things are different today.' In one sense, the whole aim of *The 300 Spartans* is to show the audience that he is wrong. *The 300 Spartans* saw itself as an historical account with many things to say to contemporary circumstances.

The 300 Spartans is a Cold War film and needs to be viewed in this context. In the previous chapter, we saw how deeply Hollywood was involved with the policing of Cold War rhetoric. *Spartacus* may have signalled a breakthrough in the treatment of blacklisted artists, but it didn't alter the fundamental political dynamic. Fear of the threat posed by the Soviet Bloc continued to permeate US popular culture. Tensions between the United States and Russia had been building for most of the early 1960s. Only a month after the release of *The 300 Spartans* these tensions would boil over into the Cuban missile crisis and the world faced the very real possibility of nuclear war between the two superpowers.

During this period of fear and uncertainty many were looking for historical parallels to help elucidate the fraught and confused times. *The 300 Spartans* was not alone in seeing the clash between Greece and Persia as a precursor to the conflict between Communism and Democracy. In the year before *The 300 Spartans* was released, Stringfellow Barr published *The Will of Zeus* (1961), his magisterial account of Greek history from the Archaic period until the time of Alexander. While Barr's politics were liberal (some accused him of being leftist), his account of Greek history is suspicious of all forms of totalitarian power and he is fascinated by ways to oppose the loss of freedom. Like *The 300 Spartans*, Barr saw much value for contemporary politics in the study of Greek history. 'Mr. Barr, haunted

by the present world crisis and our fumbling attempts to unite rival states in a peaceful community of nations, stresses the Greek failure to unite city states into a cooperative federation', reads one review (Prescott 1961: 41). The one exception to this general rule was the Greek coalition against Persia, and Barr gives it a prominent place in his account of Greek history.

Fuelling the interest in Greek history were a number of important recent discoveries arising from archaeological investigations. One of these relevant to the Persian Wars was the announcement in June 1960 of the discovery of the so-called 'Themistocles Decree', an inscription that detailed the plans Athens made in preparation for the Persian invasion. The discovery received wide publicity on both sides of the Atlantic with large spreads devoted to it. The *New York Times* featured the inscription on its front page; whilst on the inside it published a full translation with the technical Greek terms explained in parentheses. The inscription was seen as a foundational democratic document. 'The Athenian equivalent of the United States Declaration of Independence or the Gettysburg address', declared the inscription's finder, Michael Jameson (Knox 1960: 1). Moreover, the inscription was also seen as testament to the 'foresight and genius' of Themistocles who became recognised as the mastermind behind the Athenian preparations for the Persian War. All articles on the inscription single him out for praise for his brilliant command of strategy. Ralph Richardson's portrayal of Themistocles in *The 300 Spartans* as a brilliant strategist and wily politician fits neatly with this newly enhanced view of the Athenian statesman.

The Persian Wars effortlessly lent themselves to assimilation with Cold War rhetoric. It was all too easy to transform them into the story of noble, democratic free western states forced to fight against the aggression of a massive, despotic, totalitarian, Eastern power. Only a few years before *The 300 Spartans*, Nobel Prize-winning author William Golding made a pilgrimage to Thermopylae, a journey he had been planning for over twenty years. For Golding, visiting Thermopylae was a revelation; finally he understood why the battle mattered. Thermopylae's importance arose because of its place in the long history of the fight for freedom:

I knew now that something real happened here. It is not just that the human spirit reacts directly and beyond all argument to a story of sacrifice and courage, as a wine glass must vibrate to the sound of the violin. It is also because ... that company stood in the right line of history. A little of Leonidas lies in the fact that I can go where I like and write what I like. He contributed to set us free. ('Hot Gates' reprinted in Golding 1965: 20)

Time and again, we see confluences between modern and ancient military agendas. It is this logic, for example, that sees the British decide to name one of their naval submarines *Thermopylae*, after the ancient battle. The links did not stop with the name. The motto of the submarine 'we shall

fight in the shade' (appropriate for a submarine) is a punning appropriation of one of the most famous Spartan quotations from Herodotus' account of the battle of Thermopylae. In the same year as the release of *The 300 Spartans* the British naval submarine *Thermopylae* established official formal links with the modern town of Thermopylae. Everywhere people were only too happy to see themselves as the heirs of Leonidas and Themistocles.

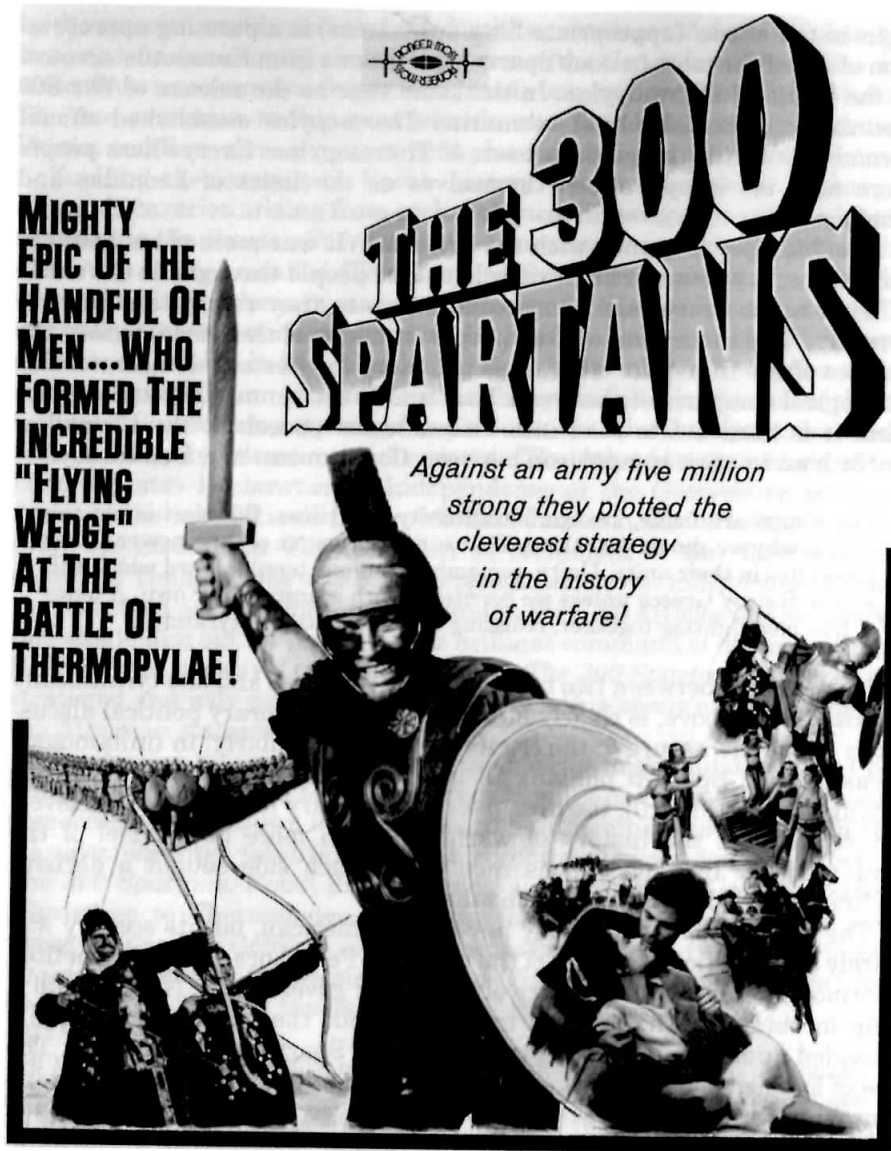
The 300 Spartans ends with the line that, 'It was more than a victory for Greece, it was a stirring example to free people throughout the world of what a few brave men can accomplish once they refuse to submit to tyranny.' The invocation of 'free people throughout the world' makes the politics of the film quite clear. This is a story for western democrats. The ideological comparisons between East and West simmer throughout the film. It is hard not to read into Themistocles' speech at the Council of Corinth an implicit comparison between Communism and Democracy:

These men are fierce, savage, bloodthirsty, merciless. But that is not the reason why we should fear them. That is not the source of their power. Their power lies in their unity. Unity, remember that one terrible word which will surely destroy Greece unless we counter it with a unity of our own. A unity of free men fighting together, resisting this united tide of tyranny.

This opposition between two types of 'unity', one free and one tyrannically imposed from above, is clearly informed by contemporary political discussions about the nature of the Soviet collective. Similarly, in (in)famously recasting the Spartan phalanx in the film publicity as the 'Incredible Flying Wedge' [Fig. 10], the film gives this military formation ('the cleverest strategy in the history of warfare') much more of the feel of the contemporary US/Soviet arms race where each side sought a decisive technological advantage over the other.

The ideology of the film may have been American, but its scenery was purely Greek. Filmed outside of the village of Perachora, the film benefited enormously from the assistance of the Greek government. Not only did it help in obtaining the location for filming, but the Greek army happily provided numerous extras to play the roles of Spartans and Persians. The use of location shots is most effectively shown in the montage of Spartans marching through Greece to Thermopylae. Over the course of a couple of minutes, the audience is treated to a variety of evocative Greek landscapes. As Phylon and Ellas struggle to keep up with the army, we learn that Greece is a hard and unforgiving environment; at least that is one way of reading the rather comic inability of the Spartan pipers to keep their footing on the stony ground. Critics singled out the scenery for especial praise in their reviews. For many, it was the only thing worthwhile about the film.

Certainly, the acting and script are rarely praised. The *Times*' critic was



10. Beware 'the Flying Wedge'! Advertisement, *The 300 Spartans* (1962)

particularly virulent in his condemnation of the film. The film's dialogue was 'pathetic' and 'Richard Egan gives an acceptable account of an eager American soldier, whose name happens to be Leonidas'. 'It is shallow stuff, no more memorable than a weather report dated 480 BC', remarked the *New York Times*. Only Ralph Richardson (Themistocles) seems to have

garnered any praise for his performance, but even here the praise is often back-handed. 'Actor's skill can't save "Spartans"' reads the headline for one review (*Chicago Daily Tribune* 12/9/1962: B6). Richardson's training as a classical stage actor made him suited to the role. He had first come to attention as Mark Antony in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and he brought the same rhetorical stage presence to his performance as the Athenian orator.

After a short period in 'first run' cinemas, the film quickly moved to drive-ins where it was routinely paired in a double-feature with the Elvis Presley boxing film *Kid Galahad* (1962). The films make an interesting combination. Each in their own way eulogises the plain simple life and the necessity of fighting to achieve it. In *Kid Galahad*, Presley plays the role of a small-town mechanic who takes up boxing as a way of earning money and respect so that he can marry his sweetheart Dolly. Opposed by gangsters, he fights his way to achieving his dreams and his girl.

The 300 Spartans may have died in the cinema, but one feature that kept it alive in the public mind was its tie-in marketing. Two popular spin-offs of the film were a novelisation by John Burke entitled *The Lion of Sparta*, (which was the original title of the film script; in the US, the novel was also released under the film title *The 300 Spartans*), and a comic book version of the film produced by Dell Comics.

While the comic book follows the film quite closely, Burke's novel presents a much more complex story than the one presented in *The 300 Spartans*. Released in the run-up to the release of the film, *The Lion of Sparta* brings out the militarism and brutality of Spartan society. When Phylon (in the novel he is called Teucer) considers committing suicide, he encounters a couple about to cast their infant child over the cliff because the Spartan Council have judged it too sickly. This prompts him to rant against the nature of Spartan society and ultimately convince the parents to leave Sparta and seek a better life outside its territory. Such explicit criticism of the Spartan way is something we never see in the film. The novel is also more explicit about Spartan pederasty. Borrowing terminology from Plato about the heavenly love of men for men, the narrator of the novel, the seer Megistheus, describes the youth of Phylon: 'when he was a boy there had been many men who had loved him with the love which we held higher than the love of a man for a woman. I had been one of those who had admired from a distance – an ageing man myself, stricken by his youthful perfection, yet knowing even then that he was destined for the love of woman' (Burke 1961: 6). In bringing out these depths and complexities, Burke's novel doesn't so much whet the appetite for *The 300 Spartans*, rather it shows up the film's deficiencies.

Plot summary

As the introductory voice-over declaims, this film tells the story of 'a turning point in history, of a blazing day when three hundred Greek warriors fought here to hold, with their lives, their freedom and ours'.

The story begins with the massed forces of Xerxes entering Greece. Xerxes (David Farrar) is shown upon his throne reminiscing about his father's defeat at the battle of Marathon and swearing to avenge Persia for this loss. As Xerxes promises to fulfil Darius' dream of 'one world, one master', a Spartan spy, Agathon (John Crawford) is brought before the king. After initially sentencing the spy to death, Xerxes decides it is better to release him so that he can bring word of the size of Xerxes' army to the Greeks and so dissuade them from further resistance.

As he leaves the camp, Agathon encounters the Spartan Grellas (George Moutsios) who has accompanied the exiled Spartan king Demaratus to Greece in the company of Xerxes. Grellas asks Agathon to take a greeting to his son Phylon (Barry Coe) who still resides in Sparta. Agathon angrily rebukes Grellas for consorting with the enemy and strikes him with his whip.

Meanwhile in Corinth, the Greeks debate how best to meet the threat of Xerxes' invasion. Some states such as Corinth favour collaboration, whilst others such as Athens, led by their statesman Themistocles (Ralph Richardson), propose opposition to the invading army. The matter is decided when Sparta, represented by king Leonidas (Richard Egan), declares its support for Athens. Together a coalition of Greeks led by Sparta will oppose the Persian forces. Poring over a map of Greece, Leonidas and Themistocles plan to halt the Persian advance at Thermopylae.

Meanwhile in Sparta, the young Phylon has fallen in love with the young Ellas (Diane Baker). Together they meet on the hills above Sparta and discuss the upcoming war. Phylon proposes that he approach Leonidas to grant consent in his father's absence for him to marry Ellas. He is unaware that his father is currently seeking sanctuary in the camp of Xerxes.

Not all of Sparta agrees with Leonidas' plan to send Spartan soldiers beyond Corinth. Opposition comes from members of the Spartan Council led by a councillor called Xenophon who lost his two sons in a battle with Athens. He is consequently blinded by hatred, and opposes an expedition to Thermopylae, which he argues only assists the safety of Athens not Sparta. Advice is sought from the Delphic Oracle, which reports that Sparta will be saved, but only at the loss of one of its two kings. This causes unease amongst the Spartan Council and they are reluctant to let the Spartan army march out against the Persians, especially as this expedition would violate the rules of the Carneia festival. Leonidas, knowing that if Sparta doesn't march it will be impossible to rouse the other Greeks against Persia, commands his personal bodyguard of three hundred men who are not bound by the rulings of the Council to assemble and to prepare to leave for Thermopylae. Leonidas storms out of the Council meeting warning the Spartans not to delay in sending more troops to support his expedition to Thermopylae.

Before Leonidas leaves for Thermopylae, Phylon asks Leonidas' permis-

sion to marry Ellas. Leonidas reveals that Agathon has informed him that Grellas is consorting with the enemy and refuses to grant consent to the marriage. In addition, he forbids Phylon from accompanying him and his men to Thermopylae.

Distraught at the news of his father's treachery as well as the loss of his chance to marry Ellas and his deprivation of a place in Leonidas' bodyguard, Phylon climbs up the Taygetus mountains with the intention of committing suicide by throwing himself off a cliff. However, he is prevented from this act by Ellas who suggests instead that they follow the Spartan army to Thermopylae in the hope of persuading Leonidas to change his mind. Phylon is convinced and together he and Ellas travel to Thermopylae.

On arriving at Thermopylae, the Spartan forces fortify the pass and prepare to repel the Persians. The Persians are caught out by the Spartan military prowess. Xerxes' brother is killed in a skirmish and then, while Xerxes musters his forces for a counter-attack, the Spartans stage a daring night attack burning his tent to the ground.

While these battles occur, Phylon and Ellas have sought shelter with a nearby shepherd and his wife who have a hut by the pass. They live their life alone with only the brooding Ephialtes (Kieron Moore) for company. Phylon sneaks into the Spartan camp and joins the Spartans on their night attack against Xerxes' tent. In the course of events, he risks his life to save another Spartan. Leonidas is impressed by Phylon's bravery and welcomes him back into the Spartan army. The Spartan who Phylon saves turns out to be Ellas' father.

Xerxes reassembles his troops and charges towards Thermopylae. Time and again he is beaten back by superior Spartan strategy and bravery. Thousands of the best Persian soldiers are killed by Leonidas and his men.

In the hills, Ellas continues to live with the shepherd family. Ephialtes has fallen in love with Ellas and approaches her whilst she fetches water. However, he is rebuffed by Ellas and in his anger, he decides to punish her and her lover Phylon by revealing to Xerxes that there is a goat path that will allow the Persian forces to by-pass Thermopylae and encircle the Greek forces.

Word arrives from Sparta that no Spartan army is coming to relieve them. Grellas appears in the Spartan camp to inform them that Xerxes will soon have the Greeks surrounded. Leonidas prepares for a final confrontation with the Persians. He knows that he will in all likelihood be destroyed, but he also knows that if he can hold them off for long enough it will give the Greeks time to escape. Leonidas sends Phylon and Ellas to carry word to the other Greek forces. Phylon initially prefers to face death against the Persians, but Leonidas orders him and he reluctantly obeys. Leonidas is keen that word of his actions be carried to Sparta because he knows that his death will rouse the Spartans to fight for Greek freedom.

Surrounded by the Persians, the Spartans prepare for their final battle.

In the fighting Leonidas is killed. Xerxes stops the battle and declares that he shall spare the remaining Spartans if they will hand over the body of Leonidas. The Spartans refuse and Xerxes has them all slaughtered by his archers. The film ends with a shot hovering over the body of Leonidas while a voice-over praises the Spartan bravery and recounts how it was instrumental in inspiring the Greeks to their eventual victory over the Persians at Salamis and Plataea.

Key scenes and themes

The nature of Sparta

The society of ancient Sparta occupies a privileged place in western culture. Famous for its martial valour and praised for the simplicity of its lifestyle, many have found it inspirational, an ideal community whose form and values they would like to recreate in their own time. *The 300 Spartans* continues this tradition of imaginings about Sparta, both perpetuating received notions of Spartan life and challenging certain assumptions about how Sparta operated.

'With this or on this'

We see a group of young men in tunics marching in loose military formation through the street. Crowds of onlookers cheer them on, while martial flute music plays in the background. These youths are the next generation of Spartan soldiers and today they become men, taking their final oaths and receiving their precious shields and red cloaks. The scene cuts to Phylon standing before the men and women of Sparta.

In front of him stands Queen Gorgo who instructs him in the laws that govern the life of a Spartan warrior: 'You must treasure freedom above life, shun pleasure for the sake of virtue, endure pain and hardship in silence, obey orders implicitly, seek the enemies of Greece and fight them fearlessly until victory or death.' She then hands him his shield, reciting as she does so 'E tan e epi tas' [Fig. 11]. Ellas, who has been watching the ceremony, explains to one of the onlookers the meaning of the phrase: 'With this or on this. Either come home victorious with this shield or dead on it.' The ceremony completed, Ellas rushes forward to congratulate Phylon on becoming a full-fledged Spartan warrior.

If we are to believe the standard accounts, the life of a male Spartan citizen was a strange, complicated business. Separated from their families at the age of seven, Spartan boys lived in all-male bands until the age of thirty. For the first thirteen years of this period, they were regularly beaten and physically challenged. It was a system of education that was designed to induce qualities of hardness, obedience, and martial prowess. The only clothing Spartan boys received was a single red cloak a year. Their bedding consisted of reeds that they pulled out of the riverbank by



11. An education in Spartan duty. Gorgo and Phylon, *The 300 Spartans* (1962)

hand. At the age of twenty they applied for admission to communal messes. Admission to the messes was for life and this institution became the social centre of the Spartan citizen's existence. It was only at the age of thirty that Spartans could leave their barracks to marry and set up a household. Indeed, for the first weeks of marriage, a husband was not supposed to officially leave his mess, but would slip away in secret to be with his wife. Given such peculiarities, strategies of representation are difficult. How is it possible to capture such a life story? How can one indicate the character of such men? It is a problem that confronts not only filmmakers, but artists, writers, and historians as well. Telling the story in its entirety is difficult, particularly if you want to retain sympathy for the Spartan state as *The 300 Spartans* so crucially needs to do.

One popular method has been to reduce Spartan culture to a series of well-known stories or sayings. These hint at the brutality, but spare you the gritty details, giving you instead a memorable story or image. In this way, Sparta lives as a series of anecdotes. So, for example, children's books teach Spartan resilience through reciting the celebrated story of the boy who stole a fox and hid it under his cloak. Even though the fox started gnawing at his stomach, he endured the terrible pain rather than be caught stealing. Only when he dropped dead was the crime discovered. Such emblematic stories permit us to glimpse the key set of Spartan values that Gorgo rehearses above in her speech to Phylon – willingness

to suffer in silence, obedience to the laws, indifference to luxury, and bravery in the face of insurmountable odds.

The film displays admirable commitment to such material. It repeats a number of the most familiar Spartan sayings known from classical literature. For example, when the Persians declare that their 'arrows will blot out the sun', Leonidas delivers the famous retort that in that case 'we fight in the shade'. The interchange repeats almost word-for-word the exchange given in Herodotus (7.226) between the Spartan Dienekes and a soldier from Trachis who warned him about the number of Persian archers that he faced. Similarly, the film ends with Simonides' famous epitaph for the Spartans killed at Thermopylae which was erected, according to Herodotus, on the spot where the last Spartans fell: 'O Stranger tell the Spartans that we lie here obedient to their word' (Herodotus, *Histories* 7.228). Remarkably these sayings are twice given in the original classical Greek (with modern Greek pronunciation). The first, 'With this or on this', is given in the scene described in the box above. The second is 'molon labe' ('come and take them') and constitutes Leonidas' reply to Xerxes' emissary's request that the Spartans surrender and hand over their weapons to the Persians (Plutarch, *Sayings of the Spartans* 51.11).

The decision to give the phrases in Greek has a curious effect. On the one hand, it disrupts the audience's ability to suspend disbelief and reminds us that we are watching drama, not events as they really happened. This is underscored when the woman asks for the Greek to be translated. The translation can't be for her benefit. After all, the conceit of the film is that as a Spartan woman she should be fluent in Greek. How can a Greek not understand Greek? When Ellas explains the phrase to her, she is really explaining it, not particularly subtly, to us, the audience. At the same time, for all the problems that the shift to Greek causes in continuity, it also serves to elevate the sentiments expressed. Wrapped in their original tongue, these Spartan sayings take on an added air of authenticity. They are like magical, semi-divine incantations, true nuggets of the Spartan ethos. We are drinking straight from the source of Spartan mythology.

However, there are limits to the way in which the film will blindly follow the standard script for eulogising Sparta. Gorgo may praise the Spartan constitution, but the film ultimately tells a different story and, in doing so, departs from a strong tradition running through western thought about the superiority of Spartan governance. Moreover, in questioning the nature of rule in Sparta, the film involves itself in wider questions about the Greeks and the rectitude of their commitment to free speech and debate.

From antiquity onwards, political theorists were fascinated by the strange form of government that Sparta enjoyed. Ruled by two kings, the constitution, like the Roman republican constitution, seemed to combine elements of monarchy, democracy, and oligarchy into a 'mixed constitution'. The most famous proponent in antiquity of the 'mixed constitution'

was the second-century BC writer Polybius and ever since then there have been numerous advocates for the adoption of such a constitution. Wherever one goes, whether it is Renaissance Florence, Revolutionary France or America, unified Germany, or reformist England, it is always possible to find passionate believers in the Spartan form of government.

What is striking about the depiction of the Spartan government in *The 300 Spartans* is the way in which it departs from the generally positive depiction of the Spartan constitution. Representations of Sparta in the twentieth century, particularly cinematic representations, rejected the trend that one should look to Sparta to see how affairs should be ordered. Any confidence in Spartan governance falls apart in this film.

The problems with the system of dual kingship are exposed from the beginning of the film. Rather than providing an opportunity for one ruler to lead in battle and another to look after affairs at home, it is shown that the dual system promotes division and treachery. As Agathon leaves the Persian camp, he encounters Grellas and so we learn of the exiled Spartan king Demaratus and his retinue of exiled Spartans serving with Xerxes. We then cut to the inside of Xerxes' tent where Demaratus sits next to Xerxes sharing his food. Demaratus alludes to the story of his deposition from the kingship in Sparta when his rival king Cleomenes – alleging that Demaratus was not a legitimate son of a Spartan king – installed Demaratus' relative Leotychidas on the Spartan throne in his stead. Demaratus is light on the details of this sequence of events, but his passion and anger are clear. Being king of Sparta is clearly not a safe occupation. Moreover, this system which sent Demaratus into exile has, in doing so, given Xerxes a valuable tool in his conquest of Sparta. Demaratus will make a perfect puppet ruler for the Persian king.

Similarly, the Spartan Council are shown to be weak and foolish. They fail to see the big picture. Their excessive love of Sparta makes them unable to see their duty to wider Greece. They blindly follow tradition, superstitiously refusing to allow troops to move during a Spartan religious festival. The system of checks and balances, through which the dictatorial authority of the king was minimised, rather than producing the best outcome, instead leads to tragedy and the needless loss of life of the 300 Spartans. Instead of being the best form of government, the events surrounding the deployment of troops at Thermopylae show it to be the worst.

This motif of the Spartan government as a failed system proves to be an enduring one. It is picked up later in *300* (2007). Here the criticisms become even more extreme. In *The 300 Spartans* Leonidas criticises Xenophon, his opponent in the Council, for growing so bitter with hatred over the death of his sons that he has become a danger to the State. His words are true, but Gorgo declares that Xenophon's behaviour is understandable, possibly even forgivable. 'Dead children are not easy to forget, Leonidas', she reminds him. In *300*, there can be no forgiveness for the politicians of Sparta, in particular its chief magistrates, the ephors. They

are shown as inbred degenerates driven by lust, greed, and envy. There is no good in them. They, and other leading politicians, sell out their king for a bag of Persian gold.

Oddly, in a film devoted to the concept of freedom, the plot seems to support the idea that the best form of government is benign kingship. If only Leonidas had been allowed to make all the decisions, then tragedy could have been averted and the Persians defeated all the more quickly. It was consultation and voting that proved his undoing. Indeed, the film is ambivalent about all democratic processes.

The Council of the Greeks at Corinth is shown to be far from perfect. 'People arguing while their house burns' is how Leonidas describes the Council. Xerxes tells Artemisia that his greatest chance of success lies with Greeks failing to unify. The scene then cuts to Corinth and we see a speaker offering precisely the type of advice that we know will lead to Persian success and the destruction of the Greeks. When the speaker makes his disastrous suggestion that each state should negotiate with Persia independently, his comments are not derided, but warmly received by the assembled delegates. Themistocles makes an impassioned speech in favour of unity, but he is almost undone by a rival speaker who asks him about an unfavourable oracle from Delphi. At the end of the meeting, the Council agrees to unite, but, as Themistocles remarks to Leonidas, it was a close run thing. 'I wouldn't care to go through an ordeal like that again', he sighs. So much for Greek democracy in action. It seems that it is only when kings and wily politicians combine to subvert the process that the correct decision is ensured.

This ambivalence about democracy sits alongside numerous examples of fine rhetoric devoted to the concept of freedom. The situation is all the more paradoxical given the amount of effort that the film expends in making Sparta a suitable vehicle for promoting a free and just society. In this film, Sparta is made over in the image of the modern liberal state. Indeed, at certain points, the film seems to be in denial that it is showing a story about Sparta at all. The first few minutes of the film as the title credits roll show us nothing of Sparta. It is only Athens, cradle of democracy, that we see as images of the Acropolis blend into an interior shot of the Parthenon. Thucydides once predicted that the impressive ruins of Athens would ensure that she always had precedence over Sparta in our collective memory, and the credits seem to show that he was right.

This re-making of Sparta can be seen in the depiction of how Leonidas conducts Spartan foreign policy. 'Sparta will fight whether others will follow or not', declares Leonidas. This brave piece of rhetoric which envisages a Sparta running the risk of facing the might of Persia alone flies completely in the face of the historical reality of the situation. Sparta did not need to convince other states to fight with words or acts of bravery. It could demand that its allies fight for her, and it was impossible for them to refuse her.

In *The 300 Spartans*, the Council of the Greeks is clearly modelled on the United Nations where sovereign nations meet to discuss and resolve important issues and pressing problems. Debate, not coercion is the order of the day. Each city-state is depicted as being free to make up its own mind about its relations with Persia. It is an attractive idea, but such freedom was certainly lacking in the fifth-century Peloponnesian. While some states such as Argos were free to come to their own arrangements with Persia, it is the exception. The vast majority of states in the Peloponnese, including large states such as Corinth, were bound by treaties that obliged them to follow Sparta into battle, if she chose to enter the war.

Sparta dominated the Peloponnese as the leader of a large coalition of states, the so-called 'Peloponnesian League'. Its position was secured through a series of binding bilateral treaty obligations between Sparta and her allies, and one of the key clauses in these treaties was that Sparta and her allies 'have the same friends and enemies'. Effectively, this meant that should Sparta declare war then her allies were obliged to follow her. Sometimes they did so a little reluctantly, but in almost all cases once the call to arms was made then the member states of the Peloponnesian League provided contingents of men or ships to fight. Throughout *The 300 Spartans*, we hear constant references to Sparta providing inspiration to other states to oppose Persia, but the film is entirely silent on the fact that Sparta can command dozens of city states to fight the Persian invasion.

The reason why such political niceties are forgotten is obvious. Recognition of Spartan control of the Peloponnese threatens to blur the clear distinction between the free Greeks and the imperialist Persians. There is only room for one power that can threaten and pressgang subject states to war, and that is Persia.

If the omission of the Peloponnesian League is odd, the absence of the helots is even more striking. Ancient Spartan wealth and power was secured by its control over the huge conquered populations of nearby Messenia. Occupying a position between a slave and a serf, this oppressed population enjoyed few rights. Their lands were owned by Spartan masters and their produce was tithed to provide sustenance to the Spartan messes. The helots were treated as spoils of war. Each year the Spartans symbolically would declare war on the helots as a way of reaffirming their status as booty, chattels for their Spartan overlords. Literature about Sparta preserves numerous accounts of the brutal treatment meted out to helots. One story recounts how helots would be forced to get drunk by Spartans. The ensuing foolish drunken antics of the helot provided physical proof of their inferiority and a lesson reminding Spartans of the dangers of drink. Another tells how Spartan youths would be sent out to the fields to terrorise the helots, murdering any helot that they managed to capture outside at night.

Helots performed numerous household duties and even accompanied Spartans on campaign, performing the menial tasks that an army on the

march requires (feeding animals, carrying equipment, etc.). They should be ever present in our story, yet we never see a single one. All we see are what are euphemistically called 'servants'. The ugly face of Spartan power is hidden from the viewer. It is the equivalent of filming the *Gone with the Wind* story, but excising all reference to slaves. It's a fantasy, less troubling in many ways, but undeniably false.

Gorgo and the search for women

One of the problems that makers of Greek historical epics face is the absence of women from our sources. Even the under-represented women of Roman history seem plentiful compared to their Greek counterparts. This absence creates a problem because it potentially limits the range of stories that can be told within the narrative arc of the film. Filmmakers are faced with the choice of either perpetuating the gender bias of ancient accounts and limiting their accounts to just the deeds of men or violating their commitment to historical accuracy and inventing female characters. It has the potential to derail any opportunity for romance, as well as alienating a large section of the viewing audience. To this end, filmmakers have either invented female characters and plots (such as the love affair of Phylon and Ellas) or constructed rounded female characters from our fragmentary sources as they do with the figures of Artemisia and Gorgo.

Gorgo's code

The scene begins with a close-up shot of a boiling pool of water. It is one of the hot springs from which Thermopylae (lit. 'the hot gates') takes its name. From out of the pool emerges a wax tablet stuck on the end of a sword. The camera pans up to reveal Leonidas who proceeds to scrape the now soft wax from the tablet. Underneath the wax is revealed a message from Queen Gorgo. In order to prevent the message from being intercepted, she has cleverly hidden the message underneath the tablet's wax surface. To the casual enquirer, it would have looked like a blank wax tablet. 'My wife is a very clever woman', declares Leonidas.

In the figure of Gorgo, the wife of Leonidas, filmmakers were lucky to have one of the few female figures for whom we have a reasonable body of evidence. Sparta traditionally allowed its women more freedom than Athens. Indeed, the Spartan attitude towards women often scandalised the more repressive Athens. Yet despite this, we know little about individual women. The one exception is Gorgo. We first encounter her in our records as a young child of eight or nine in the court of her father, King Cleomenes of Sparta. Herodotus records that when Aristagoras was trying to persuade Cleomenes to assist him in his revolt against Persia – a revolt that would eventually precipitate the Persian Wars – he approached the king in Cleomenes' house as a suppliant (Herodotus, *Histories* 5.51).

Noticing that Gorgo was standing in the room, Aristagoras asked that she be excused so that he could outline his plan. Cleomenes refused to dismiss his daughter from such discussion and bade Aristagoras to continue with his entreaty. Aristagoras proceeded then to attempt to bribe the king. First by offering ten talents, and ever increasing the amount until he reached fifty talents. At this Gorgo could take it no more and cried out to her father: 'Father, this stranger will destroy you if you don't leave him'. Cleomenes, pleased with his daughter's response, took her advice and left. Thanks to Gorgo's intervention, Aristagoras left without Spartan help and Sparta avoided a costly and doomed military expedition.

The next time that we hear of her in Herodotus' account, she is married to Leonidas. Indeed, according to Herodotus, it was Leonidas' marriage to Gorgo that helped secure him the Spartan kingship. Leonidas had not been predicted to succeed to the Spartan throne. He had two older half-brothers, Cleomenes (the father of Gorgo) and Dorieus. Indeed, had Cleomenes been less ambitious and less prone to political intrigue than Leonidas would never have succeeded to the Spartan throne. However, when his plots against Demaratus were exposed, Cleomenes found himself impeached, an event which contributed to disturbing his mind and set off the sequence of events that led to his eventual suicide. Even then Leonidas would not have gained the throne had not his brother Dorieus been killed in Sicily. This left a spot open to either Leonidas or another relative Cleombrotus. According to Herodotus, the Spartans chose Leonidas because of his age and his marriage to Gorgo.

Herodotus' account makes Gorgo a key player in games of Spartan politics. She comes across as a shrewd advisor and a wise counselor, and this impression clearly forms part of the ancient tradition about her. For example, Plutarch attributes a number of smart and pithy statements to her in his *Sayings of Spartan Women* (*Moralia* 240 d-e). The scene involving the wax tablet is based on an anecdote preserved in Herodotus' account, which is designed to demonstrate the cleverness of the queen. According to Herodotus, Demaratus, although exiled in Persia, was not enamoured of the Persian plans to invade Greece and so sent word to Sparta to warn them of the king's plans. To avoid detection, he inscribed the message into the wood of a writing tablet and then covered the message in wax so that the tablet looked like a blank slate. This he entrusted to a messenger to take to Sparta, but while he entrusted the object to the messenger, he did not reveal the secret of the hidden message, lest the messenger be captured on his journey and the message discovered. Thus, the Spartans were initially confused by receiving a blank slate. It was only Gorgo who guessed the ingenious method that Demaratus had used and was able to reveal his warning to Sparta.

The film clearly knows about this tradition of a capable Gorgo, one able to meddle in the politics of the State. Yet apart from this moment involving the secret message to Leonidas, we almost never see it in the film. In this

respect, the passionate, eloquent, politically-engaged Gorgo of Zack Snyder's *300* (2007) is closer in spirit to the Gorgo of our ancient sources. The only time we see Gorgo taking charge in *The 300 Spartans* appears to be the scene discussed above where Phylon takes his Spartan oath of allegiance. Yet, at the very end of the scene, Gorgo's position is undercut. She is only inducting Phylon into the Spartan citizenry because his mother is dead. Normally, it would be his mother that would be performing the ceremony. Gorgo is acting as surrogate mother, not queen.

This idea of the domesticated, motherly Gorgo dominates in the film. Her character is trapped by the conventions of genre. Leonidas talks about politics, she talks about children. As we have seen many times before, films set in the ancient world operate with a reasonably rigid gender dichotomy. It is hard to be a 'good girl' and a player in the narrative. In order to be virtuous, one needs to sit on the sidelines. Her passivity is signalled in the prophecy that she receives from the Spartan seer Megistheus:

He sacrificed a lamb and read the entrails. He said that there was wonderful good fortune for both of us. He said that you will be the Spartan King best remembered amongst men and he said that for centuries to come women will sing songs about my love for you.

The message of the prophecy is clear. Leonidas is the doer of deeds. Gorgo's role is to stand by adoring him.

It is the bad girls that get to play a part in the action. In *The 300 Spartans*, this role is fulfilled by Queen Artemisia of Halicarnassus. In Herodotus' account of the Persian War she enjoys a prominent role, possibly because Herodotus was also a native of Halicarnassus. Courageous and clever, she proved to be one of the best tactical naval commanders on the Persian side. She alone advised Xerxes not to engage the Greek fleet at the battle of Salamis. Xerxes ignores her advice and loses the war. During the battle of Salamis itself, she alone amongst the Persians distinguishes herself. This leaves Xerxes to famously declare that my 'men have become women, and my women, men'.

The first time we see her in *The 300 Spartans*, the film presents her as a force to be reckoned with. She strides confidently into Xerxes' tent boasting about the arrival of her ships. When Xerxes expresses surprise at seeing her, she exclaims, 'If my men fight, I want to be with them. That's the least that a queen can do for her subjects'. It is a sentiment that shows up Gorgo who seems content to send her man off to war while she keeps the home fires burning. Artemisia then proceeds to best Demaratus in a verbal joust. Only seconds before she arrived the Spartan king had been demonstrating his lethal fighting skills. Now he is unmanned by the queen's quick wit and scampers off to a corner of the tent to lick his wounds. 'A woman's tongue is far deadlier than the sword!' exclaims

Xerxes. The scene ends with Artemisia seductively arranging a date with Xerxes.

However, even with all this splendid initial character development, Artemisia is still very much sidelined in this film. Her personality is established, but we only really see her in one more scene where she lies still, being ravished by Xerxes while unbeknown to him the Spartans are sacking his camp. It is hard not to see her as a wasted opportunity. The film could have done much more with her. Yet, perhaps such criticism is misguided. The story of Thermopylae remains at its core a story about men, and *The 300 Spartans* knows this. On this level it succeeds. Critics have debated which is the 'manliest film' of all time. Intriguingly at least one critic is prepared to list *The 300 Spartans* as their most manly movie. Others disagree. For example, Todd and Brant von Hoffman (the authors of *The von Hoffmann Bros.' Big Damn Book of Sheer Manliness*) think that the most manly film is *Spartacus*. Such discussions are, of course, ridiculous. Yet they point to a truth worth commenting upon; namely that whatever we think of *The 300 Spartans*, its gender politics are deeply problematic.

Whose history counts?

Historical epics pose a number of unique problems for filmmakers. One of the many elements that they need to consider is the problem of conflicting historical sources. Even where there is a seemingly dominant tradition, our sources for events and people are almost never univocal. The filmmaker therefore faces a problem similar to the historian in the need to patch together and reconcile conflicting accounts to construct a narrative of events.

The account of a night raid on Xerxes' tent [see box: 'The night expedition'] is unknown from Herodotus' account. Yet one does make an appearance in our extant sources in Diodorus Siculus' account written in the final half of the first century BC. In his account, Diodorus takes Ephialtes' betrayal of the trail round Thermopylae as the catalyst for the night expedition. Soon to be surrounded by the Persians, the Spartans send the other Greeks away and make a daring attack on Xerxes' encampment as a last desperate attempt to forestall their destruction at Persian hands. Diodorus even goes so far as to declare that 'if the king had remained at the royal tent, he would have been easily slain by the Greeks and the whole war would have ended almost immediately' (11.10.3). Diodorus accounts for the king's absence by his decision to leave the tent to investigate the commotion that occurred when the Greeks first invaded.

There are few academic reasons to prefer Diodorus' account as a more accurate version of events at Thermopylae. Particularly as his discussion of the night expedition soon gives way to a rather confused account of the destruction of the Greek forces in which the night expedition and Herodotus' final battle collapse into each other.

The night expedition

As darkness falls, we see a line of Spartan soldiers standing up to their waists in water. The scene cuts to Phylon using the cover of darkness to sneak down into the Spartan camp. He grabs a Spartan shield, cloak, and spear and surreptitiously joins the Spartans as they wade out to the opposing shore where Xerxes' camp lies. Inside the camp, the Persians are distracted by the pleasures of drink and women. Women dance seductively by the light of the campfire. They do not notice the advancing Spartan forces creeping out of the sea. The Spartans run into the camp and head for Xerxes' tent. They spear the guards and burst inside. Dancing girls scatter in fear. Leonidas seizes one of them and interrogates her about the location of Xerxes. She reveals that he is not there, but in the tent of Queen Artemisia. Deprived of their prize, the Spartans retreat, setting fire to tents as they go. The flames quickly catch hold and pandemonium erupts in Xerxes' camp. Men and women scatter, horses run loose, and a number of Persian soldiers are killed in the ensuing melee. Amidst all this chaos, we see an oblivious Xerxes caught up in the arms of Queen Artemisia. They hear the noise of the commotion outside and Artemisia goes to the doorway to investigate. A slave arrives bearing news of the flames that have seized the camp. Alarmed, Xerxes orders his boat to be made ready in case he needs to make a quick exit. We see the Spartans retreating after their successful raid. Almost everyone escapes unscathed, except for Ellas' father who is struck by an arrow. The Persians race to seize him, but are beaten off by Phylon who returns to save him. Leonidas joins him and together they take the wounded soldier back to the Spartan camp.

Yet, it is clear that the tale of the night expedition was an important feature of the ancient tradition surrounding Thermopylae. Diodorus almost certainly gets his account from the fourth-century BC historian Ephorus whose account seems to have been particularly influential. Pompeius Trogus, writing shortly after Diodorus, also featured it in his account of the battle. More significantly, the biographer Plutarch (c. 50-c.120 AD) uses the absence of any mention of the night expedition in Herodotus as proof of the historian's perfidy and bias. In his essay *On the Malice of Herodotus*, Plutarch declares that Herodotus omitted reference to Leonidas' brave expedition because he wished to diminish the king's glory and because he wanted to discredit the role that the Thebans played in the final stages of Thermopylae when they and the Spartans and the Thespians stood alone against the Persian forces and undertook such bold manoeuvres (866b).

Again we may doubt the accuracy of Plutarch's claims; especially since his evidence for Herodotus' hatred of Thebes is a highly embroidered story about Herodotus being maltreated by the citizens of Thebes when he went there as a teacher. Nevertheless, Plutarch's criticism creates an interesting hypothetical. What would he have made of the film? On the basis of its inclusion of a night expedition, would he have preferred its account to the

account of Herodotus? There are other elements in the film that he would also have enjoyed. One of the many criticisms that Plutarch makes about Herodotus as an historian is that he was a barbarian lover. Certainly, with its strong orientalism, the film – unlike Herodotus – could never be described as sympathetic to the Persian invader. We are left with a somewhat strange situation. Potentially a film that we would criticise for including unhistorical elements in its plot might actually have seemed more authentic to one of our ancient sources for precisely the reason that it included those unhistorical elements.

At stake here is a broader question about the nature of history and its relation to film. The night expedition serves a number of useful cinematic ends. It provides a useful device to reconcile Leonidas and Phylon. It breaks up the monotony of the sequence of land battles. It allows the film to develop the relationship between Xerxes and Artemisia. Artistically, it varies the colour palette of the film by adding an exciting action scene in the darkness of the Greek night. Given such cinematic advantages, the presence of the night expedition scene seems obvious. The film-makers were keen to include such an expedition even before they heard of Diodorus' account. Yet the question remains whether the decision to include it or any of the other anachronisms and historical errors should have given the director pause. The historical advisor to the film was against its inclusion. While ordinarily cinema should not be judged by the standards of the historian, does it make a difference if a film claims to be 'historical'? Is this claim of historicity just empty rhetoric, a piece of marketing hype to make the account seem more believable, more real? Or does it mean something more?

A parallel might be drawn with films that claim to be cinematic adaptations of literary works. Both the historical film and the adaptation profess to be limiting themselves. The director surrenders his freedom of play supposedly for a higher cause; namely, conveying a truth about a work or a set of events. The director enters into a contract with their audience that the original subject matter will not be significantly misrepresented. It is not the case that 'anything goes'. Endings cannot be altered. The spirit of the work should be preserved. The skill of the director depends on working within this reduced frame. Like the artist who paints with only a few colours or chooses to work in miniature, the genius lies in working within a set of self-imposed rules. Seen in this light, the failure to live up to the ancient sources is not an historical failure, but an artistic one. It looks like cheating.

Suggested further viewing

The Giant of Marathon (Italian title: *La Battaglia di Maratona*, dir. Tourneur and Bava, 1959)

Another film about a classic battle from the Persian Wars. This time the

battle is not Thermopylae, but the earlier battle, Marathon (490 BC). The film is best described as 'historical peplum'. Following his victory at the Olympic Games, Philippides (Steve Reeves) is appointed commander of the Sacred Guard, an elite Athenian unit designed to protect Athens from both internal and external enemies. Athens at the time is a dangerous place. The newly emergent democracy is under threat. The expelled tyrant Hippias and his supporters seek to overthrow the democracy and restore the tyrant to the city. Chief among Hippias' supporters is the politician Theocritus (Sergio Fantoni). In order to further his cause, Theocritus attempts to seduce Philippides using the wives of his attractive servant Charis (Daniella Rocca). However, his plot fails as the virtuous Andromeda (Mylène Demongeot) has already stolen Philippides' heart. While Theocritus plots inside the city, Persian forces advance on Greece.

The film provides a useful contrast to *The 300 Spartans*, which looks rigorously historical in comparison and highlights the injustice of critics who were happy to dismiss *The 300 Spartans* as just another peplum offering. While the film fails as history, it nevertheless succeeds as another episode in the extraordinary myth-making that has sought to constantly repackage the battle of Marathon ever since the time of the Athenian empire. The Athenians claimed that gods and heroes fought alongside the Greek forces at Marathon. This film continues this process of imaginative reconstruction.

Alexander the Great (dir. Rossen, 1956)

Robert Rossen was another victim of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). Called to testify about the prevalence of communism in the film industry, he initially refused and was blacklisted. Two years later he recanted and gave the committee 57 names of figures with communist sympathies or affiliations. *Alexander* is the first film that Rossen produced after his blacklisting ended and it is tempting to read his experience of brutal bullying by HUAC into the film, most notably in the way that power seems to corrupt the personality of Alexander. Starring Richard Burton as the blond Alexander, the film tells the story of Alexander's life from his birth until his death at the age of thirty-two. The film plays strongly with the notion of tragedy, hinting at Alexander's complicity in the death of his father Philip (Fredric March) and showing Alexander's disillusionment as his dreams of conquering the world turn sour.

Notes

(26/11/04). See also S. Waxman, 'Breaking ground with a gay movie hero', *New York Times* (20/11/04) and 'Alexander faces law suit', *Sydney Morning Herald* (21/11/04); cf. Nisbet (2006): 97-8, 109-11, 119-24 and Cyrino (2010): 174-9. Ancient homosexuality: Williams (2010); Skinner (2010) with bibliography.

5. Greek History on Screen: *The 300 Spartans* (1962)

The 300 Spartans: Levene (2007) and Redonet (2008). For a discussion of the battle of Thermopylae: Cartledge (2006).
Bones of Theseus: Plutarch, *Cimon* 8.3-6; *Theseus* 36.1-2.
Rationalism of *Troy* (2004): Rabel (2007).
The Giant of Marathon: Solomon (2001a): 39. *Damon and Pythias*: Berti (2008).
Rossen's *Alexander the Great* (1955): Solomon (2001a): 42-5; Shahabudin (2010).
Stone's *Alexander*: Berti and Morcillo (2008): esp. articles by Wieber, Petrovic, and Chaniotis; Cartledge and Greenland (2010). Critical reaction to Stone's *Alexander*: Solomon (2010).
Decree of Themistocles: Knox (1960) cf. 'How Athens was prepared for Salamis: Themistocles's orders found', *Times* (6/6/1960); 'How Athens was evacuated and prepared for Salamis: foresight and genius of Themistocles', *Times* (14/6/1960).
Cold War rhetoric in *The 300 Spartans*: Levene (2007): esp. 383-5. Submarine *Thermopylae*: 'Thermopylae visit by British crew', *Times* (8/10/1962): 11.
Reviews of *The 300 Spartans*: 'Rialto: *The 300 Spartans*', *Times* (26/10/1962): 14; A.H. Weiler, 'Richard Egan and Ralph Richardson star in "300 Spartans"', *New York Times* (20/9/1962): 29; M. Tinee, 'Actor's skill can't save "Spartans"', *Chicago Daily Tribune* (12/9/1962): B6. Ralph Richardson: O'Connor (1986): 40-1 (as Mark Antony).
Life of the Spartans: Xenophon, *Constitution of the Lacedaimonians*. Cf. Forrest (1968); Powell (1988).
Sparta in children's books: See, for example, the story of the 'brave Spartan boy' in Guerber (1896). Fox and boy: Plutarch, *Life of Lycurgus* 18. 'With this or on this': Plutarch, *Sayings of Spartan Women* (*Moralia* 241f.).
Admiration of Spartan constitution: Rawson (1969). Polybius on the Spartan constitution: Polybius, *Histories* 6.3.5-8. Cf. Von Fritz (1954).
Making Sparta democratic: Levene (2007): 386-8.
Treatment of helots: Plutarch, *Life of Lycurgus* 28.
Spartan women: Pomeroy (2002).
Night expedition: Diodorus Siculus 11.10; Justin 2.11.11-8; Plutarch, *Malice of Herodotus* 866a-b. Cf. Levene (2007): 395-6.
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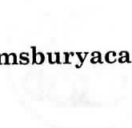
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