

# Historic accuracy of the movie 300



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HISTORICAL ACCURACY OF THE FILM 300 The Zack Snyder directed film “300” may have been a box office blockbuster, but it is aligned very little to history and riddled with a number of historical inaccuracies.

The movie portrays the historical camaraderie, enthusiasm and ‘esprit de corps’ of the Spartans with reasonable accuracy. History records how a baby, in keeping with Spartan military culture, was bathed by his mother in wine; if the baby was strong, it would survive, and if was weak it would perish in the ritual. The father would then carry the baby to elders in charge of testing and pronouncing the child suitable to be brought up as a Spartan; those failing the test were flung down Mount Taygetos {called the ‘Kaiada’}. The movie shows Spartan boys being taught military skills from the age of 7 so they could be inducted into the army at the age of 20 (Farrokh).

The movie also correctly displays the unique phalanx system employed by the Spartans, where overlapping shields presented an impassable obstruction against arrows, spears and javelins (Farrokh).

The third correct historical accurate aspect of the movie concerns the words Spartan mothers tell their sons as they go to war: “Come back carrying your shield, or being carried upon it.” In the movie, Spartan Queen Gorgo {played by Lena Headey} says these words to her husband King Leonidas {played by Gerard Butler} as he prepares to lead his 300 Spartans to war against the Persians (Borza)

The first historical inaccuracy in the movie concerns the size of the Persian army lined up against the Spartans in the epic battle of Thermopylae. The movie trailer mentions: “They {the Spartans} were 300 men against a Million.” The movie relies on the classical historian Herodotus, who estimated the Persian army at 1, 700, 000 soldiers collected from 46 nations. However,

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keeping in mind the population structure of the Achaemenid Persian Empire of that era, modern European scholars like Ernst Obst, William Woodthorpe Tarn and Robert von Fischer are in total agreement that the acceptable number was between 100, 000 to 200, 000. Even if 1, 700, 000 troops were somehow collected, it would be a monumentally huge logistical miracle to coordinate, put into position and effectively control the massive number of troops from so many nations given that computers and communication technology did not exist at that time. Secondly, if a 1, 700, 000 strong army had traveled the long distance from Asia to Greece in the absence of the railway and telegraph, the prevalent logistics and supply would be unable to provide sustenance for them (Farrokh).

The second historical inaccuracy relates to weapons and armory. Firstly, the swords of both Greeks and Persians are depicted as traditional in size. In historical records, the Persian swords during that time were shorter and resembled daggers, while the swords of the Greeks were longer than traditional swords. The short size of their swords {called 'Akenakes'} placed Persian soldiers at a disadvantage in hand-to-hand combat against the Spartans at Thermopylae (Farrokh). Secondly, the depiction of armor is wrong. Spartans are shown wearing sketchy armor – helmet, cape, greaves, shield and weapons. They have no body armor. History records that no Greek soldier ever went to war without heavy chest protective armor (Borza). The movie shows the Persians as nearly devoid of armor protection. Historical records show that scale armor was routinely issued to Persian troops (Farrokh).

The third historical inaccuracy in the movie depicts the Persian cavalry to look like Arab horsemen engaged in the Arab-Islamic wars that took place

nearly 10 decades after the Battle of Thermopylae. The Persian cavalry during the Achaemenid period were remarkably well armored although they lacked saddle technology to provide stability during horseback combat – a deficiency that made them easily dislodged from their seats by the Greek infantry (Farrokh).

The fourth historical inaccuracy is the depiction of the Immortal Units of the Achaemenids; they are shown clothed in black, similar to Hollywood ninjas. In historical fact, black and dark clothing were not worn by any Persian soldier. They also never wore iron facemasks as shown in the movie (Farrokh).

The fifth historical inaccuracy is the background of the battle. Leonidas is depicted as leading his 300 Spartans to Thermopylae in order to fight for freedom and ‘defeat’ the Persians. It is ridiculous to expect even the greatest military general to ‘defeat’ such a huge enemy force; the logical reason {as historically recorded} is that the action was meant as a delaying tactic to enable the rest of Greece to be well prepared to fight the Persians (Borza). Secondly, the movie depicts the war as a struggle of democracy, freedom, good and sensibility {represented by Spartans} against oppression, cruelty and insensibility {represented by Persians}. The movie assumes that democracy, freedom and human rights originated from Greece, when in historical fact, these notions originated simultaneously from Greece and Persia. While the Greeks {especially the Athenians and Ionians} put forward the idea of ‘Demos’ {the people} and ‘Kratus’ {government}, Cyrus the Great, founder of the Achaemenid Empire strongly promoted human rights and freedom. Being a staunch follower of Zoroaster who called Persia the ‘Land of Free/Freedom’ {Zamin Azadegan} where every

individual has the choice between good and evil and has the right to freedom of speech, thought and action, Cyrus the Great proclaimed in a decree on a clay calendar called the ‘Cyrus Calendar,’ the first human rights charter in history (Farrokh). Thirdly, the 300 Spartans are depicted marching SOUTH out of Sparta against the backdrop of Mount Taygetos on the right. In fact, Thermopylae lies in NORTH Sparta (Borza). Fourthly, the movie does not show that economic rivalry was a major cause of the war as well. The Achaemenid Empire’s naval prowess, which began when the father of King Xerxes {played by Rodrigo Santoro}, Darius the Great built the world’s first Imperial Navy, was increasing; their naval scouts had been dispatched to far-off places up to South Italy to forge trade links with west Mediterranean countries. The increasing economic might of the Persians in the Mediterranean was looked upon as a threat to the well-established and successful Greek maritime economic network comprising thriving trading posts in South Italy, South France, the Modern Republic of Georgia and the Caucasus (Farrokh). Lastly, history records the communication between Xerxes and Leonidas {prior to the battle of Thermopylae} as being written messages. In the movie, the exchange is oral: when Xerxes calls on the Spartans to lay down their arms, Leonidas defiantly responds: “Come and take them” (Borza).

The sixth historical inaccuracy is the depiction of Greeks and Persians in the movie. Historical pictures and several descriptions of Xerxes depict him as a solemn figure of medium height, sporting a long beard and clad in soft robes. Xerxes in the movie is well described by history professor Ephraim Lytle of Toronto University, Canada: “Eight feet tall, clad chiefly in bodily piercing and garishly made up, implying he is a homosexual.” Secondly, the movie

shows Persian women as having little or no intellect, and purposeless except for use as sexual objects in harems. History records ancient many Persian women serving as priestesses, leaders and protectors of learning.

Zoroastrian principles give prominence to women, putting them on par with men in human rights, privileges and freedom. Some women like Apranik and Azadeh were fierce resistance leaders against invaders. Even Roman history records Persian women serving as soldiers in the Persian cavalry. Thirdly, why was there NOT even a single Greek actor in the movie? It would be logical to have Greeks in at least a few roles to depict Greek characters. The moviemakers are guilty of blatantly ‘ nordifying’ the classical Greek characters. Fourthly, Persians are continuously depicted as black Africans – the Persian messenger is black, the Persian general killed by Xerxes is black, the Persian emissary sent by Xerxes to Leonidas is black, and many other Persians in the film are also black. There are NO historical references to show Persians were black; history also clearly differentiates between Persians and ancient Arabs. Classical period Greek vase pictures too depict the Persians as identical to Greeks in every aspect except wardrobe and equipment. Dr. Ahmed Sadri, history professor at Lake Forest College of Islamic World Studies commented: “ Synder’s Persians are typical white American survivalists fighting a sea of racially inferior blacks, yellows and browns” (Farrokh)

The seventh historical inaccuracy is summed up in a one-liner that appears in the final part of the movie, namely, that the war is against ‘ the Mysticism and Tyranny’ of Persia. Persia and the ‘ East’ are associated with ‘ mysticism,’ while Greece and the ‘ West’ are associated with ‘ reason and learning.’ While Greece undoubtedly was a major contributor to many fields

of learning {such as mathematics and philosophy}, it is wrong to assume that it was the source of ALL fields of learning. The growth and development of learning, similar to human rights, has been achieved by the unified combination of different ideas and influences of people all over the world. In fact, not many people know that many classical Greek scholars like Pythagoras, Plato and Democritus visited Persia to imbibe learning from centers like Persis and Babylon. Secondly, there arises the question: “ How do you fight mysticism?” No historical record shows that Xerxes attempted to enforce ‘ mysticism’ in Europe during his invasion. It is also historically recorded that Greece has its own share of mysticism in the form of superstition; for example, the study of astronomy in Athens during the 5th Century B. C was considered as disrespect for sacred things and was forbidden (Farrokh).

The last historical inaccuracy comprises a series of imaginary fabrications. Certain fantasy animals are shown, such as huge rhinoceroses and a massive creature resembling a wolf that challenges the boy Leonidas. Secondly, the scenes of internal political works of Sparta have no historical reference whatsoever. Thirdly, there are hardly any references to Queen Gorgo in history; the movie willfully expands her role to add a female and sexual perspective. In a steamy scene she is shown having sex with Leonidas (Borza). In another scene, she is shown as negotiating with Spartan politicians to the extent of even sexually submitting to the politician Theron {played by Dominic West} in the process.

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