

The thermopylae 'myth': ancient and modern attitudes to the battle

[History](#)



In 'Western' culture, the Battle of Thermopylae is often regarded as the most famous battle in ancient history (Lazenby, 1993: xviii; Freeman, 2000: 179).

What is so extraordinary about the battle alone is the attention it has received from both the scholarly community and from the wider public in general, with numerous appearances in film, literature, television programmes and computer & video games.

The legend of Thermopylae is not only restricted to a modern day audience either; Spartan heroics from that day inspired contemporary Greeks as well as a wave of Neo-Classical poets and philosophers throughout 18th and 19th century Europe and also the darker intentions of the Nazi regime pre and post World War II. I would like to try and find out how the battle was used by contemporary and more modern people alike to justify their own actions.

The defeat at Thermopylae of the Allied Greek forces in 480 BC was a fierce blow to the poleis at the time, but the circumstances of the defeat in particular were used as a convenient propaganda tool for the various cities in Greece to unite under one banner. Garland tells us that a basic Greek belief was to consider passing bad judgement upon the dead as 'impious'; they had become better and stronger because of their passing and thus untouchable. This would have been especially true of the 'heroic dead' (Garland, 1985: 10).

Therefore, on an early basis, no blame could have been attached to those who fought at Thermopylae, so in a way, it would have been necessary to make the best out of a bad situation. Educated Greeks would have been brought up on the works of Homer (Garland, 1985: 77) and the Spartans

would have been no different. Indeed, Herodotus' version of events is akin to the description of Homer's heroes (Il. 12. 310-21), whose courage matched their ambitions of immortality (Clarke, 2002: 65). In fact, real life reflected Herodotus' words.

The average hoplite was educated by Homer's work and given a basic set of ideals to live by; strategoi felt the need to replicate the heroic ethos shown in Homer's works (Clarke, 2002: 65; Wheeler, 1991: 151). Following in the (fictional) footsteps of their ancestral heroes and faced with a choice between a glorious death and an ignominious retreat, their mind was already made up. The Spartan poems of Tyrtaeus, looking down upon old men who died in battle, rather than young would also have had a lasting effect (Garland, 1985: 77).

Though a costly sacrifice, those who died young in battle were not counted as *ai?? ros* (early deaths), so as not to discourage the act of dying for one's beliefs or polis (Garland, 1985: 77). Even Mardonios, the defeated commander at Plataea noted that these beliefs made Greek warfare a costly business, even for the victor (Herod. Hist. , 7. 9. 2; Clarke, 2002: 76).

Conversely, when fighting against non-Greek troops, Hoplite casualties were minimal - Hanson worked out that only one or two thousand hoplites lost their lives during the campaign (Hanson, 1995: 311).

The Spartan legend of self-sacrifice was thus promoted by the tale of Aristodemus - the 'unfortunate survivor', who found himself socially ostracised when he returned home. Though, as Sparta's powers declined over the centuries, they would have been less able to punish those who

'trembled', as we can see by the capture of live Spartans at Sphacteria and the decisive routing of the Spartan phalanx at Leuctra (Ducat, 2006: 45).

What this shows though, is that Thermopylae was a 'one-off' event.

Aristodemos' punishment can only be understood in the incredible context of the battle. Herodotus' account of Aristodemos would have only confirmed to readers at that time of the Spartan willingness to die for their beliefs (Ducat, 2006: 14). However, Xenophon also informs us of the Spartan Anaxibios, who used his life to buy time for other soldiers to escape and ably demonstrates the Spartan belief outside of Thermopylae (Xen. Hell. 4. 8. 38). The sacrifice may well have compensated for the tactical mistakes made by the Spartans in battle (De Sanctis, 1943: 64).

Greek propaganda was used to dress up Thermopylae as a 'necessary loss' via the use of supporting Oracle statements and provide the moral boost the poleis needed for victory (Jameson, 1991: 215). As Napoleon said, the morale factor was the most important in war (Cartledge, 2004: 164). The example of self-sacrifice had a knock on effect in other contemporary cities, especially Athens, where, in 403BC, the pro-Democratic prophet charged alone into the pro-Tyrannical (The Thirty) soldiers and was killed (Xen.

Hell. 2. 4. 18-19). His death was used as a sacrifice which encouraged his soldiers to defeat the enemy (Jameson, 1991: 215-6). Though Thermopylae was used as a springboard for Greek success, the Athenians used their skill in propaganda to promote Salamis as the conclusive battle of the war.

Simonides' poetry and Aeschylus' play *The Persians* all effectively blanketed

out the contribution of other city states like Corinth to promote Athens as Hellas' saviour (Freeman, 2000: 181).

Though Plataea was really the decisive battle of the campaign, Spartan propagandists were inferior to their rival counterparts and their contribution at Plataea with other allied city states is overlooked (Freeman, 2000: 183). If the battle was downplayed in the campaign as a whole in Ancient times, then it undertook an exponential boom in publicity during the Neo-Classical revival of Enlightened Europe. The characters of the Persian wars represented the character of patriotism (Morris, 2000: 220-1).

In the second half of the 18th century, an idealisation of the classical world brought with it the inevitable positive light on Sparta; the philosophical poets Johann Gottfried Herder and Freidrich Schiller praised the 'principle of Thermopylae', the Spartan patriotism (Reinbach, 2002: 324). The Neo-Classical era did not necessarily bring total support of Spartan ethics however; some labelled them as a 'Kamikaze squadron' (Cartledge, 1979: 204). In Revolutionary France, references to the Persian wars and Thermopylae, specifically, were a common sight.

Dumouriez held a forest pass at Valmy, declaring it as 'Thermopylae in France' whilst the town of Saint-Marcellin (Isi?? re) renamed itself 'Thermopyles' (Rawson, 1969: 285). Latent Laconophilia was also displayed by the instances of babies being baptised as Lycurgus and Spartiate, while theatre productions began telling tales of Spartan derring-do, such as Combat de Thermopyles in July 1794, where the story was fitted to modern

ideals, ironically with Leonidas as a general promoting a 'kingless future for all' (Rawson, 1969: 285).

Nationalist struggles in Europe produced a cornucopia of literature, especially in France, where Chateaubriand wrote of his romantic journey to Sparta to seek for the tomb of Leonidas (Rawson, 1969: 294; citing 1811: 103, 10, 112, 115). The battle at Thermopylae was alluded to in many poetical verses, such as Pichat's 1825 poem, *Leonidas* (Rawson, 1969: 294). The heroes of Thermopylae were also present in the Irish nationalist poems, written against the British Imperialist oppressors.

The British, in this case, assumed the mantle of Xerxes and his ilk in Thomas Davis' *A Nation Once Again*, where the nationalist Irish heroes replicated the travails of the 300 in choosing death over a life of lost freedom (Clarke, 2002: 64). Clarke quite rightly makes the point that the 'graves of patriot men and women spring living nations' reinvented the Greek concept of becoming a hero when dying for your country (Clarke, 2002: 64). To the British literary establishment, Waterloo was symbolically linked with Marathon instead (Road, 2007: 268).

Modern Greece also used the glorification of Hellenic classical antiquity to promote its own nationalism. During the Battle of Greece in World War II, General Gouras attacked German forces at Marathon with '300 soldiers' (Hamilakis, 2007: 78). Metaxas' regime in Greece heavily endorsed excavations which ideologically linked Classical Hellenism with modern day Greek nationalism and promoting patriotic sacrifice as well as the militarism of Sparta (Hamilakis, 2007: 195, 202).

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The Thermopylae legacy was also used to promote other forms of nationalism, such as the dictatorship of Hitler in the German Reich. Many German ancient historians of the time were Nazi collaborators, using Spartan history to promote Nazi Eugenics and ideology. Nazi school curriculums even compared Xenophon's *Anabasis* to Hitler's rise to power (Reinbach, 2002: 331). During World War II itself, the Nazi regime did not hesitate to send soldiers to their doom by inciting the legend of Thermopylae, like the Sixth army in Stalingrad (Reinbach, 2002: 331; Rawson, 1969: 342).

Hitler also decided to stay in Berlin at the end of the war, hoping to replicate Leonidas (Reinbach, 2002: 336, citing Bormann, 1981: 51). As we can see from the various sources of evidence, the battle has been taken to mean something for everyone. In contemporary Greece, the battle was used as a catalyst for city-states to unite under one banner and die protecting their 'freedom' (freedom for citizens to choose their own government, rather than individual freedoms - Freeman, 2000: 183-4).

In modern times, the glorification of classical ideals and the beliefs that the Spartans (and others) who died for were used by the European literary elite to rally people and justify their right for nationalist struggle (Hamilakis, 2007: 76). Though death, defeat and an unmarked grave is all the 300 (or 299!) really achieved that day (Den Boer, 1954: 295, no. 10), it set an enormous precedent in later Ancient Greece and then the modern world that people should fight for their beliefs if they believed that strongly.