



# The Curse of 300? Popular Culture and Teaching the Spartans

by Emma Stafford

## Introduction

I teach Spartan history at the University of Leeds both as part of an introductory course about the Greek World and also as part of a range of more closely-focused Special Subject modules for second and third year undergraduates, including *Image of Sparta* and *Classics on Screen*. I use the film *300*, and other modern popular culture material, in different ways in each of these modules: as a subject in its own right for *Classics on Screen*, focusing on questions around what the material says about contemporary culture; and, in *Image of Sparta*, as a coda to the course's survey of ancient 'images', which allows for reflection back over the ancient material. Blanshard and Shahabudin suggest that cinematic output can be '...an important vehicle for discussing the values, history, and cultural politics of the classical past. It demands that we think about what are the key elements that make the cultures of the ancient Mediterranean so distinctive and worthy of study' (Blanshard & Shahabudin, 2011, p. 1). While modern popular receptions of ancient Greek history are not actually on the AS or A Level specifications (perhaps they should be!), they have some potential for teaching at this level if a teacher wants their students to get to grips with the particular topic of Sparta.

## *Sparta's place on the curriculum*

First of all, the teacher certainly does not *have* to teach the Spartans. There is a specific Sparta option in the OCR AS Level Ancient History, and obviously they have a significant part to play in the 'Greece and Persia' option for one of the A Level units. In the AQA Classical Civilisation A Level, the Spartans likewise feature as part of an option on the Persian Wars.

## Sparta options at AS and A Level

OCR AS Level Ancient History, Unit AH1 Greek History from Original Sources, Option 3 (of three): Politics and Society of Ancient Sparta.

OCR A Level Ancient History, Unit AH3 Greek History: Conflict and Culture, Option 1 Greece and Persia 499–449 BC and Option 2 Greece in conflict 460–403 BC (Option 3 The culture of Athens 449–399 BC).

AQA A Level Classical Civilisation, A2 Unit 3, Option CIV3B (of four): The Persian Wars, including the role of prominent Spartans (Leonidas, Pausanias) at Thermopylae and Plataea; set texts Aeschylus' *Persians* and Herodotus Books 6–8.

In every case, the Spartans are up against some attractive competition. Why then might a teacher want to choose them as a topic?

## *Receptions of Sparta and why they matter*

First, let's take a very quick look at what it is about ancient Sparta which has attracted people's interest over the years since the Renaissance.

## Major themes in the depiction of Sparta

### *The concept of the ideal state*

Sparta has often been held up by political theorists as a model for its mixed constitution in 16<sup>th</sup>- and 17<sup>th</sup>-century Europe (see, for example, Rawson (1969, pp. 158–169 and 186–201) and MacGregor Morris (2004)).

### *Austerity, no-frills toughness*

Spartan society has often been thought of more generally as a popular model of how to live. This has been particularly marked in 18<sup>th</sup>-century France (see, for example, Rawson (1969, pp. 220–230) and Cartledge (1999), while the Spartan education system was a model for Nazi Germany (see, for example, Roche (2013) and Hodkinson (2010)).

### *Symbol of freedom*

The Battle of Thermopylae on its own has often been held up as a symbol of

freedom, of patriotism and of fighting against the odds. Take, for example, Richard Glover's, *Leonidas 1737* epic poem in 9 books lines 1-11:

Rehearse, O Muse, the deeds and glorious death  
Of that fam'd Spartan, who withstood the pow'r  
Of Xerxes near Thermopylae, as fell  
To save his country...

Meanwhile, in Revolutionary France, Thermopylae acted as a rallying point in plays such as *Le Combat de Thermopyles, ou l'école des guerriers* (de Tréogate, 1794), *Léonidas, ou le départ des Spartiates* (Guilbert de Pixérécourt, 1799); and the epic poem *La Grèce sauvée* (de Fontane, 1790s). During the 1821 Greek War of Independence Thermopylae provided the model for the uprising against the Ottoman Turks: thus the second verse of the *Patriotic Hymn* by Rhigas Feraios (1798), translated by Byron as *Greek War Song* (1811):

Sparta, Sparta, why in slumbers  
Lethargic dost thou lie?  
Awake and join thy numbers  
With Athens, old ally!  
Leonidas recalling  
That chief of ancient song,  
Who saved ye once from falling,  
The terrible! The strong!  
  
Who made that bold diversion  
In old Thermopylae,  
And warring with the Persian  
To keep his country free;  
With his three hundred waging  
The battle, long he stood,  
And like a lion raging,  
Expired in seas of blood.

More modern references to Thermopylae still occur. The popular newspaper *Metro* published an article on 18<sup>th</sup> March 2011 about workers trying to avert catastrophe at nuclear plants in Japan, reporting: "There are actually 300 of them on the site, working in shifts of 50... Former atomic energy official Gennady Pshakin said: "They are like the Spartans, standing up against all that's thrown against them."

#### *Sparta in the media*

Sparta has formed the basis of a number of **historical novels**. These include: Edward Bulwer Lytton, *Pausanias, the*

*Spartan* (1873); Caroline Dale Snedeker, *The Spartan* (1911); Naomi Mitchison, *Black Sparta* (1928) and *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* (1931); F. Van Wyck Mason, *Lysander* (1957); John Burke, *The Lion of Sparta* (1961); Roderick Milton, *Tell Them in Sparta* (1962); Steven Pressfield, *Gates of Fire: an Epic Novel of the Battle of Thermopylae* (1998); Valerio Massimo Manfredi, *Spartan* (2002); Helen Schrader, *Are They Singing in Sparta?* (2006) and *Spartan Slave, Spartan Queen: a Tale of Four Women in Sparta* (2007); and Robert Montgomerie, *Helot* (2008). These are of variable quality as literature, but all are of interest as attempts to imagine life in ancient Sparta, and as reflections of popular (mis)conceptions of Spartan history. Pressfield's novel has perhaps been the most influential in recent years, for example recommended to the men under his command by former US Marine captain Nathaniel Fick: 'If there's a better description of combat leadership, I've not seen it. I recognized Pressfield's characters in the men I was serving with...' ('Books and battles', *Washington Post* 17/7/05).

More recently still Sparta has inspired **graphic novels and comics**. Frank Miller and Lynn Varley's, *300* (Dark Horse Comics, 1998) was inspired by the 1962 film, mentioned below. There are some bizarre elements in the depiction of Sparta (especially the Ephors and the oracle), but other elements follow ancient sources. The prequel graphic novel *Xerxes* is supposedly the source for the film *300 Rise of an Empire* (2014), although it has yet to appear for public consumption. Kieron Gillen and Jordie Bellaire's *Three* (Image Comics, 2013-14) is a series of five graphic novels, with the attraction of having had an historical consultant in the form of Professor Stephen Hodkinson from the University of Nottingham.

**Video games** are also worthy of note: including the *God of War* series (hero: Spartan Kratos, 2005-14); *Spartan: Total Warrior* (2005); *Ancient Wars: Sparta* (2007); *300: March to Glory* (2007); *Hero of Sparta* (2011); and *Spartan Wars; Empire of Honour* (2013).

Even this quick overview should be enough to show that ancient Sparta crops up in a wide variety of contexts and guises, some of them perhaps more weighty than others, but all reflecting a deep-rooted fascination with the peculiarities of Sparta's social system and,

especially, the image of the indomitable Spartan soldier.

#### *Sparta on screen*

Finally, Sparta has been the subject of numerous films. *300* has made the most significant impact on contemporary society, but it owes an indirect debt, via Frank Miller's graphic novel, to the 1962 film *The 300 Spartans* directed by Rudolph Maté.

#### **The 300 Spartans (Rudolph Maté, 1962) – UK certificate U**

**Plot summary (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0055719/plotsummary>):** In 480 BC, the ambitious, cruel and merciless King Xerxes of Persia invades Greece with his huge army to extend his vast slave empire. The brave Spartan army is the great hope to free and unite Greece, and king Leonidas promises to the council of the Greek States to defend the passage of Thermopylae, the only way by land to reach Athens. However, he is betrayed by the politicians of Sparta and stays alone with his personal body guard army composed of three hundred warriors only. Using courage and great knowledge of strategies of war, he defends Thermopylae until a treacherous goatherd tells King Xerxes a secret goat passage leading to the back of Leonidas' army.

#### **Major continuities with and departures from the ancient sources:**

- The film is quite faithful to Herodotus in terms of plot, and includes several *Sayings*.
- The night raid on Xerxes' tent is an episode *not* in Herodotus, but instead taken from 1<sup>st</sup>-century BC Diodorus Siculus.
- There is a romantic sub-plot: the fictional character Ellas follows her fiancé Phylon to Thermopylae; their survival provides a small 'happy ending' and suggests an alternative way of life (see Levene (2006)).

#### **300 (Zack Snyder, 2007) – UK certificate 15**

**Plot summary ([http://www.fandango.com/300\\_v334031/summary](http://www.fandango.com/300_v334031/summary)):** *Sin City* author Frank Miller's sweeping take on the historic Battle of Thermopylae comes to the screen courtesy of *Dawn of the Dead*



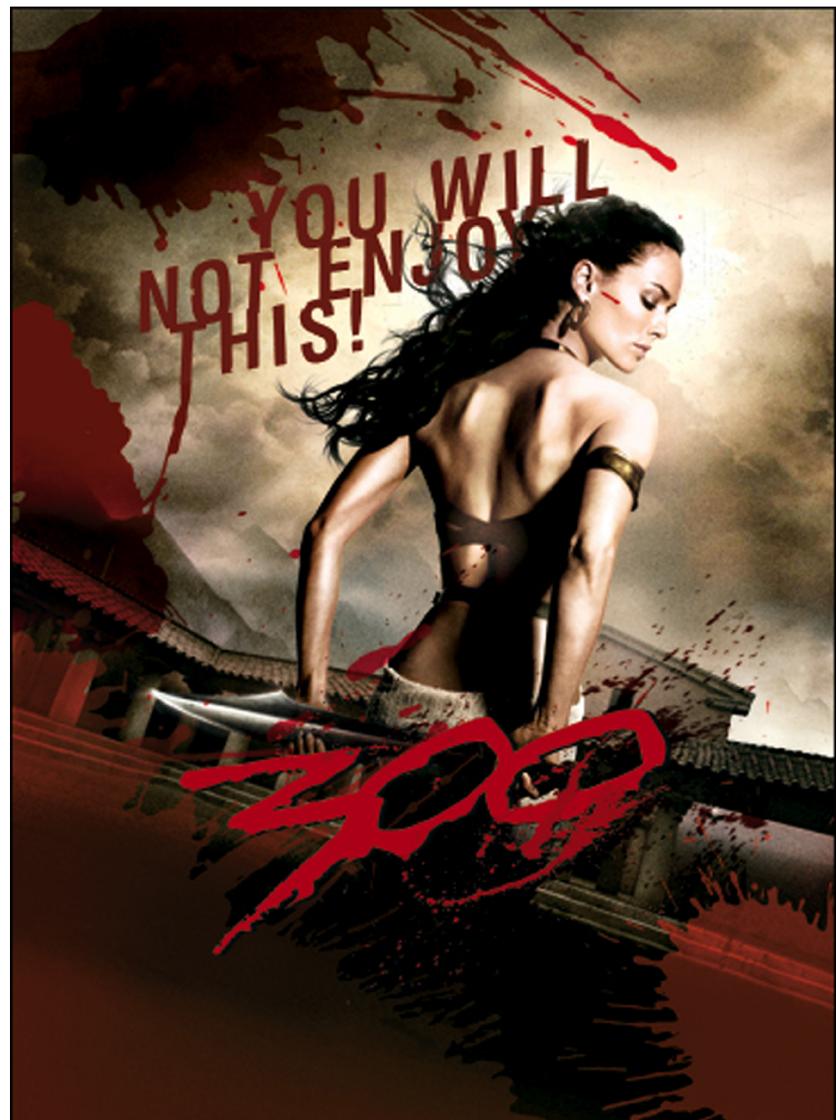
**Figure 1.** | Publicity for *300*: Gerald Butler as Leonidas at Thermopylae (the quoted dialogue comes from a *Spartan Saying*) ([www.warnerbrothers.co.uk](http://www.warnerbrothers.co.uk)).

**Major continuities with and departures from the ancient sources:**

- The film is based on Frank Miller's graphic novel rather than directly on Herodotus; it repeats its bizarre elements.
- There is a sub-plot concerning Gorgo's attempts to persuade the Council to send reinforcement; this is a modern invention. There has been much internet debate prompted by a scene between Theron and Gorgo which has been interpreted as rape.

**Reception:** 'Unless you love violence as much as a Spartan, Quentin Tarantino or a video-game-playing teenage boy, you will not be endlessly fascinated' (Kenneth Turan, *Los Angeles Times*, 11th March 2007); watched by soldiers in Iraq 2006/

director Zack Snyder. Gerald Butler stars as Spartan King Leonidas and Lena Headey plays Queen Gorgo. The massive army of the Persian Empire is sweeping across the globe, crushing every force that dares stand in its path. When a Persian envoy arrives in Sparta offering King Leonidas power over all of Greece if he will only bow to the will of the all-powerful Xerxes (Rodrigo Santoro), the strong-willed leader assembles a small army comprised of his empire's best fighters and marches off to battle. Though they have virtually no hope of defeating Xerxes' intimidating battalion, Leonidas' men soldier on, intent on letting it be known they will bow to no man but their king. Meanwhile, back in Sparta, the loyal Queen Gorgo attempts to convince both the sceptical council and the devious Theron (Dominic West) to send more troops despite the fact that many view Leonidas' unsanctioned war march as a serious transgression. As Xerxes' fearsome "immortals" draw near, a few noble Greeks vow to assist the Spartans on the battlefield. When King Leonidas and his 300 Spartan warriors fell to the overwhelming Persian army at the Battle of Thermopylae, the fearless actions of the noble fighters inspired all of Greece to stand up against their Persian enemy and wage the battle that would ultimately give birth to the modern concept of democracy.



**Figure 2.** | Publicity for *300*: Lena Headey as Queen Gorgo ([www.warnerbrothers.co.uk](http://www.warnerbrothers.co.uk)).

Afghanistan 2007 the night before going into battle (see Patrick Hennessey in *The Junior Officers' Reading Club: killing time and fighting wars* (Penguin, 2009)).

**300: Rise of an Empire** (Zack Snyder, 2014) – UK certificate 15

**Plot summary** (<http://www.300themovie.com/synopsis.html>): Based on Frank Miller's latest graphic novel *Xerxes*, and told in the breath-taking visual style of the blockbuster *300*, this new chapter of the epic saga takes the action to a fresh battlefield—on the sea—as Greek general Themistokles attempts to unite all of

Greece by leading the charge that will change the course of the war. *300: Rise of an Empire* pits Themistokles against the massive invading Persian forces led by mortal-turned-god Xerxes, and Artemisia, vengeful commander of the Persian navy... The action adventure stars Sullivan Stapleton (*Gangster Squad*) as Themistokles and Eva Green (*Dark Shadows*, *Casino Royale*) as Artemisia. Lena Headey as her starring role from *300* as the Spartan Queen, Gorgo; Hans Matheson (*Clash of the Titans*) stars as Aeskylos; David Wenham returns as Dilios, and Rodrigo Santoro stars again as the Persian King, Xerxes.

*Some examples of discussion points raised by the films*

The two *300* films are both certificate 15, so could legitimately have been seen by Year 12 and 13 students; both are by now easily available for home consumption via DVD or download and a multitude of clips on YouTube. Rather than trying to ignore them, or simply dismissing them as full of historical inaccuracies, I'm suggesting that there is mileage in actively engaging with them. This could be done at any level from a full-blown study, drawing on the rapidly-growing range of scholarship on classically-themed cinema (see below), to the modest use of just a handful of carefully-chosen clips to prompt discussion particular topics. Examples of the latter approach might be divided into (a) **Sparta and Spartan Society** and (b) **Imagining Thermopylae**.

(a) *Sparta and Spartan Society*

I include three examples of the depiction of Spartan society: the *agoge*, Queen Gorgo and the Spartan Government.

*The agoge according to 300*

*300* begins with an arresting sequence of a boy on a freezing night pitting his wits against a wolf.

**Voice-over from beginning of *300*:**

When the boy was born... like all Spartans, he was inspected. If he'd been small or puny or sickly or misshapen... he would have been discarded. From the time he could stand, he was baptised in the fire of combat. Taught never to retreat, never to surrender. Taught that death on the battlefield in service to Sparta... was the greatest glory he could achieve in his life. At age 7, as is customary in Sparta... the boy was taken from his mother and plunged into a world of violence. Manufactured by 300 years of Spartan warrior society... to create the finest soldiers the world has ever known. The *agoge*, as it's called, forces the boy to fight. Starves them, forces them to steal... and if necessary, to kill. By rod and lash the boy was punished... taught to show no pain, no mercy. Constantly tested, tossed into the wild. Left to



**Figure 3.** | Publicity for *300: Rise of an Empire*: Sullivan Stapleton as Themistokles ([warnerbrothers.co.uk](http://warnerbrothers.co.uk)).

pit his wits and will against nature's fury. It was his initiation... his time in the wild... for he would return to his people a Spartan... or not at all. [See 'Wolf scene' at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HSvBr4Qa-Fs>]

**Classroom discussion:** How does this compare to the picture of Sparta's education system given by the ancient sources? See Xenophon, *Constitution of the Spartans 2*; Plutarch, *Lycurgus 16*.

*Queen Gorgo in 1962 and 2007*

Here are two dialogues from the films: **Extract from *The 300 Spartans (1962)*:** Gorgo stands in as mother for the young Phylon:

GORGO: Are you ready to hear the laws sacred to a Spartan warrior?  
PHYLON: Yes, Queen Gorgo.  
GORGO: Here they are. 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 wherever they may be, and fight them fearlessly, until victory or death.

**Gorgo in 300 speaks before the Persian envoys:**

PERSIAN: What makes this woman think she can speak among men?  
GORGO: Because only Spartan women give birth to real men.

**Classroom discussion:** How does this compare to what we hear of Gorgo, and Spartan women more generally, in the ancient sources? See Herodotus 5.51; Xenophon, *Constitution of the Spartans 1*; Plutarch, *Lycurgus 14*; *Sayings of Spartan Women*, Gorgo 1-6 and Unnamed Spartan Women 1-30. Herodotus' Gorgo is a little girl advising Cleomenes; later viewed as a very traditional Spartan mother. In 300, the controversial subplot brings the tradition of the feisty Spartan woman up to date.

*Sparta's government*

**The mixed constitution in 300:** Only the Council of Elders is present; there is no sign of other king or assembly; Ephors have been metamorphosed and combined with an oracle.

**Extracts from 300 dialogue:**

The Ephors, priests to the old gods. Inbred swine. More creature than man. Creatures whom even Leonidas must bribe and beg... We will consult the oracle. Diseased old mystics. Worthless remnants of a time before Sparta's ascent from darkness. Remnants of a senseless tradition. Tradition even Leonidas cannot defy... for he must respect the word of the Ephors. That is the law. And no Spartan, subject or citizen, man or woman... slave or king, is above the law. The Ephors choose only the most beautiful Spartan girls... to live among them as oracles. Their beauty is their curse... for the old wretches have the needs of men...

**Classroom discussion:** How does this compare to the picture of the Ephors, and Sparta's mixed constitution more generally, given by the ancient sources? See Xenophon, *Constitution of the Spartans 8*; Plutarch, *Lycurgus 5-7*. In 300 Theron rouses up the council of Elders to traditional obstinacy – so far so good – but thence there is a radical detour from any ancient tradition in the representation of the Ephors.

(b) *Imagining Thermopylae*

There are a number of interesting access points into representations of the Persians, the Spartans and their heroic last stand at Thermopylae. For example, you might compare and contrast the appearance of both the location and the action of different versions. *The 300 Spartans* was shot on location actually at Thermopylae (there is a brief glimpse of locations and costumes in the trailer at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s5fzSjufCYY>), while *300* was shot in Montreal using blue-screen and CGI technology. There are plenty of fight scenes available on YouTube, such as the death of Leonidas at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R-6M5FukAoE&NR=1>. The Xerxes figure in Snyder's 300 is a giant, decadent figure taken straight from Miller's 300. Both Miller and Snyder have spent much time in interviews denying any racism in their depictions, but the film is still banned in Iran and is widely considered controversial in this respect. There is some historical

inauthenticity in the depiction of the phalanx in *The 300 Spartans*; depictions in the later films are arguably more accurate in some respects, though the level of violence and amount of gore are hard for many audiences to watch. Particularly worth comparing are depictions of the final scene at Thermopylae: the basic narrative makes the final stand almost inevitably moving – and it is, in both *The 300 Spartans* and *300* (Snyder), whatever the defects of each film. Likewise, Miller's final page of dead Spartans is predictably horrific, but even here we see included the famous Simonides verse, as recorded by Herodotus (5.228):

Go tell the Spartans, you who read:  
We took their orders, and here lie dead.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, you do not have to do the Spartans in A Level Ancient History or Classical Civilisation, and you certainly do not have to look at any post-classical receptions of Sparta even if you do. However, I hope to have shown that there is some potential in looking at Sparta's image in popular culture, both as a means to engage students' interest in the ancient sources, and to encourage them to think about what popular images of ancient Greek history can tell us about our own society.

## FURTHER READING

**Ancient sources:**

The Penguin *Plutarch on Sparta* tr. R.J.A. Talbert (revised ed. Harmondsworth 2005) includes Plutarch's *Lycurgus* and Xenophon's *Constitution of the Spartans* (set texts for the OCR AS option), and, as a bonus, 3 more of Plutarch's Spartan Lives plus *Spartan Sayings* and *Sayings of Spartan Women*.

**On Sparta:**

Cartledge, P. (2002). *Sparta and Lakonia: a Regional History 1300 to 362 BC*. London: Routledge.

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## On receptions of Sparta from antiquity onwards:

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## On the graphic novels:

Kovacs, G. & Marshall, C.W. (2011). *Classics and Comics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Tomasso, V. Hard-boiled Hot Gates: Making the Classical Past Other in Frank Miller's *Sin City* (pp. 145-158).

Fairey, E. Persians in Frank Miller's *300* and Greek Vase Painting (pp. 159-172).

## On the films:

Blank, T. (2015). Utopia: Cinematic Sparta as an Idea (Not a City). In M. Morcillo, P. Hanesworth & O. Marchena, *Imagining Ancient Cities in Film: from Babylon to Cinecitta* (pp. 65-90). New York: Routledge.

Blanshard, A. & Shahabudin, K. (2011). Greek History on Screen: *The 300 Spartans*. In A. Blanshard, *Classics on Screen: ancient Greece and Rome on film* (pp. 100-124). Bristol: Bristol Classical Press.

Cyrino, M. (2011). "This is Sparta!": The Reinvention of the Epic in Zack Snyder's *300*. In R. Burgoyne, *The Epic Film in World Culture* (pp. 19-38). Abingdon: Oxford University Press.

Hassler-Forest, D. (2010). The *300* Controversy: a Case Study in the Politics of Adaptation. ([http://www.uwosh.edu/filmandhistory/controversial\\_films/films/300.php](http://www.uwosh.edu/filmandhistory/controversial_films/films/300.php))

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Lauwers, J. Dhont, M. & Huybrecht, X." This is Sparta!": Discourse, Gender, and the Orient in Zack Snyder's *300* (pp. 79-94).

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If you enjoyed reading this article, you might also read:

Paul, D. (2013). Film in the Classics Classroom. Sixth Form Pupils' Choices of Video-Clips to Illustrate Themes from Homer's *Iliad*. *Journal of Classics Teaching*, 27.

Paul, J. (2013). Cinematic Representations of Antiquity in the Classroom. *Journal of Classics Teaching*, 27.

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