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Hollywood vs. Herodotus: The Historical Failings of the film *300: Rise of an Empire*

***300: Rise of an Empire*. 2014, Warner Brothers. Directed by Noam Murro. Executive Produced by Marty P. Ewing, Craig J. Flores, Jon Jashni, and Stephen Jones. Screenplay written by Zack Snyder and Kurt Johnstad. Total Run Time: 102 Minutes.**

Reviewed by Nicholas Bates

HISTORICAL TRUTHS and the embellishments of storytellers have ever been at odds with one another. This is a meager statement when applied to the liberties taken by Hollywood in their portrayals of history. Add to this a time period that is separated from us by over two millennia and apparently history is no longer even considered relevant to the telling of the tale. Never mind that the history of the Greco-Persian War was recorded by the world's first historian, Herodotus. Once again, in the name of entertainment, an important event in the course of history has been rendered into a sordid farce. *300: Rise of an Empire* is, according to the University of Alabama at Birmingham's ancient historian, Dr. Walter Ward, "about as historical as Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter." After studying the sources, I can only agree with his sentiments.

300: Rise of an Empire, as many already know, is a sequel to the highly popular film, *300*, which came out in 2007.¹ The sequel focuses its attentions on the role of the Athenians in the time before, during, and after the events of the first film, which depicted the bravery of Leonidas and the famed 300 Spartans at Thermopylae. The Battle of Marathon is shown with an abundance of inaccuracies. Most of the film, however, concentrates on the Greek fleet's naval battle at Artemisium that occurred during the

same time as the battle at Thermopylae. The climactic battle at the end of the film was the historically climactic Battle of Salamis that turned the tide of the war in favor of the Greeks. This timeline of events and the names of the characters are about the only things that this movie gets right. This review of *300: Rise of an Empire* will flesh out the historical problems that plague the film from beginning to end by focusing on the key aspects of the film that either deviate from or completely ignore the ancient sources.

The Battle of Marathon is the first major event that occurs in the movie and is also where the inaccuracies first become a major problem. The movie claims that Darius decided to attack Athens because he was annoyed by the notion of Greek freedom.² This in itself is already misleading. The Athenians had given their symbolic fealty of "earth and water" to the Persian Empire in 508 BCE, after which they later decided that they did not want to support the Persians, jailed some Persian ambassadors, and aided a rebellion of Ionian Greeks against their Persian overlords in present day Turkey.³ Obviously, the Persians had more to be angry about than just a simple annoyance about Greek freedom. The leader of the Persians, King Darius,

2 Noam Murro, *300: Rise of an Empire*, Action, Drama, Fantasy, 2014.

3 Barry Strauss, *The Battle of Salamis: The Naval Encounter That Saved Greece—and Western Civilization* (Simon & Schuster, 2004), 14.

1 Zack Snyder, *300*, Action, Fantasy, History, 2007.

therefore focused his attentions on the Athenians after putting down the Ionian Revolt. In fact, Darius is said to have had a servant remind him three times a day at every meal, "Master, remember the Athenians."⁴ And so he did.

This misrepresentation of Persian motives, however, quails before the inaccuracies of the actual battle. Athenians charging the Persians with no sense of formation or tactics whatsoever and singlehandedly slaughtering several Persians at a time is hardly true. In reality, the Athenian victory at Marathon was due to the strict phalanx formation and the tactical genius of a Greek named Miltiades. The Athenians charged at the disbelieving Persian archers and slingers as one enormous shield wall that absolutely devastated the lightly armed Persians.⁵ Even this is a small discrepancy compared to the others. The film places King Darius and his son, Xerxes, at Marathon and depicts them actually leading the Persians onto the beach. This is a complete and total fabrication. Darius sent two commanders to bring the Athenians to heel. One was a Mede named Datis and the other was Darius's nephew Artaphernes.⁶ Datis didn't have the luxury of being related to the King of Kings, but fighting against Greeks was his specialty. He had fought against the Greeks of Ionia during their revolt and he could even speak a little bit of Greek.⁷ Not only did the film falsely place Darius at the head of the Persian forces but the film's writers also had him killed by the arrow of the film's protagonist, Themistocles. Obviously, since Darius was not even at Marathon, this is not true. Darius actually died whilst planning the pacification of an Egyptian rebellion and another invasion of Greece after Marathon. The throne passed to his son, Xerxes.

The film attributes Xerxes's famous invasion of

Greece to the whisperings of his father's favorite advisor, Artemisia. Darius tells Xerxes with his dying breath, "Leave the noble Greeks to their ways. Only the gods can defeat them."⁸ After Darius breathed his last, the film shows Artemisia telling Xerxes that his father had challenged him to conquer Greece as a god king. Xerxes, now believing that his father had challenged him with his dying words, set off into the desert where he "surrendered to powers so evil and perverse that no part of Xerxes that was human survived."⁹ This is all fiction. As I said previously, Darius was already planning to punish the Athenians for their victory at Marathon. The whole desert scene just serves to portray Xerxes as some sort of demon that only the "Western" Greeks could defeat. In reality, Xerxes would have been trained much like a Spartan during his youth. Persian princes from the age of five were subjected to rigorous physical, intellectual, spiritual, and leadership training.¹⁰ Xerxes was not even the oldest of Darius's children but he was chosen because his mother was the daughter of Cyrus the Great, he excelled at his education, and he even "looked a king."¹¹ Xerxes was not possessed by some desert demon, as the film would have us believe, but was the product of an intensive education. He became King of Kings because his father, Darius, believed he was the best for the position.

The film, however, gives the true power of the Persian Empire to Artemisia. She is shown whispering in Xerxes's ear at every turn, killing off his most trusted advisors, and leading his forces. She is really the main antagonist of the film instead of Xerxes. This is perhaps the most fictionalized aspect of the movie. Her role in the war is exaggerated beyond the point of extreme. Herodotus mentions her when detailing the many contingents of Xerxes's army and this is only due to Herodotus finding it "remarkable that a woman should have taken part in

4 Herodotus, *The Histories*, Robin Waterfield, trans. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 346.

5 Tom Holland, *Persian Fire: The First World Empire and the Battle for the West* (New York: Anchor Books, 2007), 196.

6 Herodotus, *The Histories*, Waterfield, trans., 385–386.

7 Holland, *Persian Fire*, 182.

8 Murro, 300: *Rise of an Empire*.

9 Ibid.

10 Holland, *Persian Fire*, 205.

11 Ibid., 206.

the expedition against Greece.”¹² He also mentions that Artemisia’s squadron was the “second most famous in the entire navy” and that “none of Xerxes allies gave him better advice than her.”¹³ This does not mean that she was his chief advisor, however, or that she could have possibly been the puppet master of the most powerful man in the world. In fact, Artemisia was the leader of the forces from Halicarnassus and Herodotus himself was a native of Halicarnassus.¹⁴ Herodotus may have had a special interest in including and even overemphasizing the deeds of his hometown’s former leader. The fact remains that Artemisia was indeed a historical leader of a portion of Xerxes’s fleet but she was one of many. The film elevates her to a position that is so exaggerated that she might as well be a fictional character since very little historical truth is left where she is concerned. In fact, Herodotus even mentions that if anyone did have influence over Xerxes it would have been his cousin, Mardonius. He was the one who actually convinced Xerxes that they needed to punish the Athenians “for all they’ve done to Persia.”¹⁵

The role of the protagonist, Themistocles, is much more warranted than his opponent in the movie, Artemisia. Themistocles was a major figure of the Athenian resistance and indeed the architect of the Athenian naval program. His character’s portrayal in the film still suffers from some inaccuracies, though. The movie attributes his political rise to his victory at Marathon and his fateful arrow that killed the Persian king. Once again, this is not true at all, and neither is it true that Themistocles led the Athenian forces at Marathon. The Athenian command at Marathon was made up of ten tribal generals with the war archon, Callimachus, at the head. However, it was another of the tribal generals, Miltiades, who was already skilled at fighting the Persians, that was the mastermind

of the victory at Marathon.¹⁶ Themistocles was, however, present at Marathon and indeed fought bravely. He led his tribe in the middle of the phalanx where the Athenian formation was at its weakest.¹⁷ While this surely did not hurt his political career, Themistocles was on the rise well before this battle. He was a new breed of politician that came about by growing up in the time when Athens was a newly formed democracy. It is said that Themistocles moved to a bad area near the Hangman’s Gate in Athens where “the bodies of executed criminals and suicides were dumped” due to its close proximity to the Agora where the politicians met.¹⁸ This, combined with his wooing of the poor and his skill as an attorney, made him many friends and elevated Themistocles’s career.¹⁹

After Xerxes begins his march to Greece in the film, the focus shifts to the sea battles at Artemisium. While Leonidas defended the pass at Thermopylae, the Greek fleet blocked the straits of Artemisium above the northern coast of Euboea. This was the best point of entrance for the Persian fleet to reinforce their army behind Leonidas and crush the Greek land force because the eastern coast of Euboea was “rocky” and “hostile to sailors.”²⁰ Indeed, this proved true when the Persians tried to send a contingent of about two hundred ships around Euboea and a storm wiped them out.²¹ The movie actually does depict these days of sea battle as stormy and with treacherous waters. In the film, Themistocles of course commands the Greek fleet with Artemisia at the head of the Persian fleet. But this is not necessarily true on either front. Historically, it was a Spartan, Eurybiades, who commanded the Greek fleet because the other city-states would not serve under an Athenian command.²² Although he wasn’t re-

12 Herodotus, *The Histories*, Waterfield, trans., 438.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid., x.

15 Ibid., 405.

16 Holland, *Persian Fire*, 192.

17 Ibid., 193.

18 Ibid., 165.

19 Ibid., 166.

20 Strauss, *The Battle of Salamis*, 15.

21 Holland, *Persian Fire*, 279.

22 Herodotus, *The Histories*, Waterfield, trans., 489.

ally the commander of the fleet, Themistocles was still its "main strategist."²³ Four Persian nobles, including two of Xerxes's brothers were in supreme command of the Persian fleet at Artemisium.²⁴ The film shows three major clashes between the Greek and Persian fleets. The Greeks manage to hold out through the first two battles due to the unique strategies formulated by Themistocles. One of these strategies used is actually historical. The Greeks formed a giant, defensive circle that the Persians couldn't penetrate and then sent out a select few Greek triremes to attack and then retreat quickly. This tactic won the day for the Greeks and yielded them 30 new ships.²⁵ Eventually, however, both in the movie and in history, the Persians' superior numbers won out over the Greek land forces at Thermopylae and the Greek sea forces at Artemisium. After this, the Greek fleet was forced to flee to Salamis along with most of Athens, who were also forced to desert their own city to the destructive Persian force coming to sack it.²⁶

And so it came to the Battle of Salamis. In the movie, Themistocles leads the final naval assault against Artemisia and the Persian navy. Xerxes tried to use caution but Artemisia dared to back talk him saying, "Don't forget who put that crown on your childish head."²⁷ The notion that anyone would talk to the King of Kings this way is ridiculous but in the film she does and leads the navy against Themistocles in the hopes of finally crushing him. This is highly ironic since Herodotus tells us that, in fact, Artemisia was the only one of Xerxes's commanders who spoke out against fighting at Salamis. She believed they should hold Attica and either prepare for a land invasion of the Peloponnesian Peninsula or wait for the Greeks to use up all of their resources.²⁸ In the movie,

the opposite is true and the main objective of the Greek fleet is to get Themistocles close enough to kill Artemisia and end the battle. The Greek navy locks ships with the Persian fleet and Themistocles valiantly rides a horse from ship to ship and finally slays Artemisia in a typically dramatic action-movie fashion. Not long after, the Spartan fleet arrives and saves the day. This is all nonsense, of course. The Battle of Salamis was a highly strategically fought battle. Once the Persians were drawn into the Straits of Salamis, their numbers counted for nothing and the Greeks "fought in a disciplined and tactical manner, while the Persians became disorganized and lost their battle plan."²⁹ According to military historian, Barry Strauss, "Persia hoped to crush the Greeks with its superiority in numbers but blundered into an ambush in which its very mass worked against it."³⁰ The Greeks indeed won, and many Persians perished in the straits of Salamis. Oddly enough, although Athens accounted for the bulk of the fleet, it was their rival Aegina who was to be praised the most because they disabled almost as many Persian ships as Athens but with one-sixth as many ships under their command.³¹

The Greek victory at Salamis paved the way for Greece to become one of the most influential cultures of Western Civilization. More battles were to be fought before the war would be over, but Salamis was the major turning point. Ironically, Themistocles, the great Athenian hero, fell out of favor and found himself ostracized after the war. After leaving Greece, he found himself in the employ of Xerxes's son, the new King of Kings.³² So much for him being the great hero that we see in *300: Rise of an Empire*. This is how Hollywood goes, though. There must always be a hero and, in this case, it fell on the person of Themistocles. In the interest of entertainment, our history must apparently be superseded by the

23 Strauss, *The Battle of Salamis*, 18.

24 Ibid., 17.

25 Ibid., 23–24.

26 Holland, *Persian Fire*, 301–302.

27 Murro, *300*.

28 Herodotus, *The Histories*, Waterfield, trans., 510.

29 Ibid., 516.

30 Strauss, *The Battle of Salamis*, 207.

31 Ibid.

32 Holland, *Persian Fire*, 364.

need for bloody sword fights and gratuitous sex scenes. Also forced onto this ancient tale are the modern views of a free West fighting against a barbarian East. One great example from the movie is the battle at Artemisium where the Persians defeated the Greeks by use of slaves strapped with giant bags of oil who served as suicide bombers. This is to be expected where Hollywood and history are concerned, yet I can't help but wish that someday we will

get accurate representations of history's great moments. There is no need to change the story; reality is fantastical enough. I, for one, will be content with knowing the true deeds of this momentous battle recorded by the first man to inquire after the truth of history, Herodotus.

