Name\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  
300 Spartans at the Battle of Thermopylae

**Bold Text = background knowledge and reading questions** Regular text = Primary Source Herodotus

**Herodotus Sets up the Battle**

**As you read Herodotus' account of Xerxes’ call to arms, pay careful attention to the way Herodotus portrays the character of the Persian king.**

Herodotus *Histories* 7.8

After Egypt was subdued, Xerxes, being about to take in hand the expedition against Athens, called together an assembly of the noblest Persians to learn their opinions, and to lay before them his own designs. So, when the men were met, the king spoke thus to them:  
  
'Persians, I shall not be the first to bring in among you a new custom -- I shall but follow one which has come down to us from our forefathers. Never yet, as our old men assure me, has our race reposed itself, since the time when Cyrus overcame Astyages, and so we Persians wrested the scepter from the Medes.

Now in all this [Ahura mazda](http://www.livius.org/ag-ai/ahuramazda/ahuramazda.html" \t "_blank) guides us; and we, obeying his guidance, prosper greatly. What need have I to tell you of the deeds of Cyrus and Cambyses, and my own father Darius, how many nations they conquered, and added to our dominions? Ye know right well what great things they achieved. But for myself, I will say that, from the day on which I mounted the throne, I have not ceased to consider by what means I may rival those who have preceded me in this post of honor, and increase the power of Persia as much as any of them. And truly I have pondered upon this, until at last I have found out a way whereby we may at once win glory, and likewise get possession of a land which is as large and as rich as our own nay, which is even more varied in the fruits it bears- while at the same time we obtain satisfaction and revenge. For this cause I have now called you together, that I may make known to you what I design to do.  
  
My intent is to throw a [bridge over the Hellespont](http://edsitement.neh.gov/sites/edsitement.neh.gov/files/Bridges03.swf" \o "bridges over hellespont" \t "_blank) and march an army through Europe against Greece, that thereby I may obtain vengeance from the Athenians for the wrongs committed by them against the Persians and [against my father](http://edsitement.neh.gov/edsitements-persian-wars-resource-pages#DariusRelief).'

**Based on the text, what kind of ruler can we infer Xerxes is?**

**What was Xerxes’ principal reason for invading Greece?**

**In the next paragraph Herodotus describes the Greeks through the words of Demaratus, an exiled Spartan king who had sought asylum among the Persians and accompanied Xerxes on the invasion of his former homeland. Notice how Demaratus responds to Xerxes’ questions about the resistance he is likely to encounter from the Greeks, especially the Spartans, who were also known as Lacedaemonians, from the Greek name for their homeland, Lacedaemonia.**

Herodotus' *Histories*, 7.102

O king! since you’ve asked me at all risks to speak the truth, and not say what will one day prove me to have lied to you, thus I answer. Want has at all times been a fellow-dweller with us in our land, while valor is an ally we have gained by dint of wisdom and strict laws. Her aid enables us to drive out want and escape slavery. Brave are all the Greeks who dwell in any Dorian land; but what I am about to say does not concern all, but only the Spartan. First then, come what may, they will never accept your terms, which would reduce Greece to slavery; and further, they are sure to join battle with you, though all the rest of the Greeks should submit to your will. As for their numbers, do not ask how many they are, that their resistance should be based on numbers; for if a thousand of them should take the field, they will meet you in battle, and so will any number, be it less than this, or be it more.”  
  
When the Spartans fight as a [group](http://www.livius.org/pha-phd/phalanx/phalanx.html" \t "_blank), they are the bravest of all. For although they are free men, they are not in all respects free; law is the master whom they obey, and this master they fear more than your subjects fear you, King Xerxes. Whatever their law commands, they do; and its commandment is always the same: it forbids them to flee in battle, whatever the number of their foes, and requires them to stand firm, and either to conquer or to die.

**Does Demaratus sound to you like and exile and a traitor?**

**What specific Spartan attributes does Demaratus identify that would challenge the authority of Xerxes?**

##### **The Greeks Respond**

**At first the Greek response to the Persian threat had been chaotic. Xerxes had earlier sent heralds to ask for gifts of [“earth and water”](http://www.livius.org/ea-eh/earth/earthandwater.html" \t "_blank) as a sign of obedience from all of the Greek city states except Athens and Sparta. He knew that those cities would not respond or might even mistreat his envoys as they had done previously when Xerxes’ father Darius the Great had sent heralds to demand earth and water. In Athens the Persian heralds had been thrown into a pit of punishment, and in Sparta they were cast into a well and told to get the earth and water from there. In this passage Herodotus describes the differences in the ways the Greeks reacted.**

**Herodotus' Histories, 7.138**

The expedition of the Persian king, though it was in name directed against Athens, threatened really the whole of Greece. And of this the Greeks were aware some time before; but they did not all view the matter in the same light. Some of them had given the Persian earth and water, and were bold on this account, deeming themselves thereby secured against suffering hurt from the barbarian army; while others, who had refused compliance, were thrown into extreme alarm. For whereas they considered all the ships in Greece too few to engage the enemy, it was plain that the greater number of states would take no part in the war, but warmly favored the Persians.

**According to Herodotus, only the Spartans (also called Peloponnesians and Lacedaemonians, from the geographic names of their territory) and the Athenians seemed determined to resist the Persians, and of these two the more important were the Athenians, for they held the key to Greece’s naval power. Herodotus explains his reasons for thinking that Athens holds the key to Greek success against the Persians.**

Herodotus' Histories, 7.139

***And here I feel constrained to deliver an opinion, which most men, I know, will dislike, but which, as it seems to me to be true, I am determined not to withhold***. Had the Athenians, from fear of the approaching danger, quitted their country, or had they without quitting it submitted to the power of Xerxes, there would certainly have been no attempt to resist the Persians by sea; in which case the course of events by land would have been the following. Though the Peloponnesians might have carried ever so many [breastworks across the Isthmus](http://googlesightseeing.com/maps?p=&c=&t=k&hl=en&ll=37.934856,22.985458&z=13" \t "_blank), yet their allies would have fallen off from the Spartans, not by voluntary desertion, but because town after town must have been taken by the fleet of the barbarians; and so the Spartans would at last have stood alone, and, standing alone, would have displayed prodigies of valor and died nobly. Either they would have done thus, or else, before it came to that extremity, seeing one Greek state after another embrace the cause of the Persians, they would have come to terms with King Xerxes—and thus, either way Greece would have been brought under Persia. For I cannot understand of what possible use [the walls across the Isthmus could have been](http://edsitement.neh.gov/edsitements-persian-wars-resource-pages" \l "GreeceMap" \t "_blank), if the king had had the mastery of the sea. If then a man should now say that the Athenians were the saviors of Greece, he would not exceed the truth. For they truly held the scales; and whichever side they espoused must have carried the day. They too it was who, when they had determined to maintain the freedom of Greece, roused up that portion of the Greek nation which [had not gone over to the Medes](http://www.livius.org/mea-mem/media/media.html" \t "_blank); and so, next to the gods, they repulsed the invader. Even the terrible oracles which reached them from Delphi, and struck fear into their hearts, failed to persuade them to fly from Greece. They had the courage to remain faithful to their land, and await the coming of the foe.

**How does the first sentence of the paragraph (in italics) give Herodotus’ work more credibility? Why is it important that he states this?**

**Why does he think the Athenian naval power will be more important than the Spartan army? What would happen if Athens submitted to the will of the Persians?**

##### **The Greeks Meet the Persian Advance**

**At first the Greeks determined to stop Xerxes' advance in Thessaly at the pass of Olympus, but when they sent an advance party of men, they realized that Xerxes’ army was far too numerous, and so they abandoned that idea and decided to defend the much narrower pass at [Thermopylae](http://www.livius.org/th/thermopylae/thermopylae1.html" \t "_self)and to send the Greek fleet under the command of the Athenians to nearby [Artemisium](http://www.livius.org/arl-arz/artemisium/artemisium.html" \t "_blank). Herodotus explains the Greek's decision.**

**Herodotus' Histories, 7.175-177**

Then it was determined that they should guard this pass at Thermopylae, in order to prevent the barbarians from penetrating into Greece through it; and at the same time it was resolved that the Greek fleet should proceed to Artemisium, in the region of Histiaeotis, for, as those places are near to one another, it would be easy for the fleet and army to hold communication. . . . These places, therefore, seemed to the Greeks fit for their purpose. Weighing well all that was likely to happen, and considering that in this region the barbarians could make no use of their vast numbers, nor of their cavalry, they resolved to await here the invader of Greece. And when news reached them of the Persians being in Pieria, straightway they broke up from the Isthmus, and proceeded, some on foot to Thermopylae, others by sea to Artemisium.

##### **The Greeks and Persians Meet**

**Xerxes was, of course, undaunted; he believed he could provide new ships after winning on land. By August 14th-15th, the Persians pitched camp close to [Thermopylae](http://edsitement.neh.gov/edsitements-persian-wars-resource-pages" \l "ThermoArtemis" \t "_blank) with their battered fleet anchoring nearby, and by August 16th, 480 BCE, the storm had blown itself out.  
  
Meanwhile, an advance force of several thousand men from the Spartan alliance, lead by 300 Spartans, had marched north to guard the narrow pass at Thermopylae, with the rest of the Spartan army scheduled to follow. At the same time (late July, 480 BCE) an allied Greek fleet of 271 vessels, mostly Athenian, had sailed for [Artemisium](http://edsitement.neh.gov/edsitements-persian-wars-resource-pages" \l "Greek_Fleet" \t "_blank), so that from the beginning of August both the land and the sea defenses of this point on the Greek coast were in place.  
  
The Greeks and Persians were ready to fight each other for the pass at Thermopylae. Herodotus describes the scene.**

Herodotus' Histories, 7.201

King Xerxes pitched his camp in the region of Malis called Trachinia, while on their side the Greeks occupied the straits. These straits the Greeks in [general call Thermopylae (the Hot Gates)](http://www.livius.org/th/thermopylae/thermopylae1.html); but the natives, and those who dwell in the neighborhood, call them Pylae (the Gates). Here then the two armies took their stand; the one master of the entire region lying north of Trachis, the other of the country extending southward of that place to the verge of the continent.

**Why do the Greeks want to meet the Persians at Thermopylae and Artemisium?**

**What effect do you think the storm will have on the outcome of Xerxes' invasion?**

**How would you describe the Greek battle plan?**

**Do you think the Greeks expect to win a victory at Thermopylae?**

**The Greek city states were more accustomed to fighting among themselves than standing united against a common enemy. Herodotus describes how on this occasion representatives came from different regions, in groups of various sizes, to join with the Spartans in common defense of their country.**Herodotus *Histories*, 7.202

The Greeks who at Thermopylae awaited the coming of Xerxes were the following:—From Sparta, 300 men-at-arms; from Arcadia, 1,000, Tegeans and Mantineans, 500 of each people; 120 Orchomenians, from the Arcadian Orchomenus; and 1,000 from other cities: from Corinth, 400 men; from Phlius, 200; and from Mycenae 80. Such was the number from the Peloponnese. There were also present, from Boeotia, 700 Thespians and 400 Thebans.

**In the following passage, Herodotus emphasizes that other Greek allies from the region who live near Thermopylae are urged to join in the defense. Meanwhile the Athenians gather the Greek navy nearby at [Artemisium](http://edsitement.neh.gov/edsitements-persian-wars-resource-pages" \l "ThermoArtemis" \t "_blank)**.  
  
Herodotus *Histories*, 7.203

Besides these troops, the Locrians of Opus and the Phocians had obeyed the call of their countrymen. The Locrians sent all the force they had, the Phocians contributed 1,000 men. For envoys had gone from the Greeks at Thermopylae among the Locrians and Phocians, to call on them for assistance, and to say, "They were themselves but the vanguard of the host, sent to precede the main body, which might every day be expected to follow them. The sea was in good keeping, watched by the Athenians, the Eginetans, and the rest of the fleet. There was no cause why they should fear; for after all the invader (King Xerxes) was not a god but a man; and there never had been, and never would be, a man who was not liable to misfortunes from the very day of his birth, and those misfortunes greater in proportion to his own greatness. The assailant therefore, being only a mortal, must needs fall from his glory." Thus urged, the Locrians and the Phocians had come with their troops to Trachis.

**Add up the numbers in the passages, how many troops were really at the battle to help defend Greece?**

**How does the quote describe the invader (Xerxes)? Why is this used as a persuasive strategy?**

**Xerxes sends out a spy who sees the Spartans naked brushing their hair and oiling their bodies. Remember, [Demaratus,](http://www.livius.org/he-hg/herodotus/logos6_18.html" \l "Demaratus" \t "_blank) the exiled Spartan king who sought asylum at the Persian court and accompanied Xerxes on the invasion of Greece? Xerxes turns to him for an explanation of the Spartan behaviour reported by his spy.**

**Herodotus' *Historie*s, 7.209**

Upon hearing this report, Xerxes, who had no means of surmising the truth—namely, that the Spartans were preparing to do or die manfully—but thought it laughable that they should be engaged in such employments (oiling their body and brushing their hair naked), sent and called to his presence Demaratus the son of Ariston, who still remained with the army. When Demaratus appeared, Xerxes told him all that he had heard, and questioned him concerning the news, since he was anxious to understand the meaning of such behavior on the part of the Spartans. Then Demaratus said,  
  
'I spoke to you earlier, O king! concerning these men, when we had just begun our march upon Greece; you, however, only laughed at my words, when I told you of all this, which I saw would come to pass. I struggle earnestly to speak truth to you at all times, sire; and now listen to it once more: These men have come to dispute the pass with us, and it is for this that they are now making ready. It is their custom, when they are about to hazard their lives, to adorn their heads with care. Be assured, however, that if you can subdue the men who are here and the Lacedaemonians who remain in Sparta, there is no other nation in all the world which will venture to lift a hand in their defence. You have now to deal with the first kingdom and town in Greece, and with the bravest men.'  
  
Then Xerxes, to whom what Demaratus said seemed altogether to surpass belief, asked further 'how it was possible for so small an army to contend with us?' 'O king!' Demaratus answered, 'let me be treated as a liar, if matters fall not out as I say.'

**How do you think Xerxes will respond to this explanation of behavior?**

**Does Xerxes seem to respect his enemy?**

But Xerxes was not persuaded any the more. Four whole days he suffered to go by, expecting that the Greeks would run away. When, however, he found on the fifth that they were not gone, thinking that their firm stand was mere impudence and recklessness, he grew angry, and sent against them the Medes and Cissians, with orders to take them alive and bring them into his presence. Then the Medes rushed forward and charged the Greeks, but fell in vast numbers: others however took the places of the slain, and would not be beaten off, though they suffered terrible losses. In this way it became clear to all, and especially to the king, that though he had plenty of combatants, he had but very few warriors. The struggle, however, continued during the whole day.

When the Medes, having met so rough a reception, withdrew from the fight; and their place was taken by the band of Persians under Hydarnes, [whom the king called his 'Immortals'](http://edsitement.neh.gov/edsitements-persian-wars-resource-pages" \l "PersianFormation" \t "_blank): they, it was thought, would soon finish the business. But when they joined battle with the Greeks, it was with no better success than the Median detachment—things went much as before—the two armies fighting in a [narrow space](http://www.battle-of-thermopylae.eu/gallery.html" \l "pass" \t "_blank), and the barbarians using shorter spears than the Greeks, and having no advantage from their numbers. The Lacedaemonians fought in a way worthy of note, and showed themselves far more skilful in fight than their adversaries, often turning their backs, and making as though they were all flying away, on which the barbarians would rush after them with much noise and shouting. Then the Spartans at their approach would wheel around and face their pursuers, in this way destroying vast numbers of the enemy. Some Spartans likewise fell in these encounters, but only a very few. At last the Persians, finding that all their efforts to gain the pass availed nothing, and that, whether they attacked by divisions or in any other way, it was to no purpose, withdrew to their own quarters.

**What are Xerxes battle tactics?**

**What tactics do the Spartans employ?**

**Who has the advantage and why?**

##### **A Traitor Appears**

**The Greek forces knew very well that there was one very dangerous weakness in their defense of Thermopylae. Although the mountains protected them on one side and the sea on the other, there was an alternate pathway through the mountains that was well-know among the local Greek inhabitants.**  
Herodotus' Histories, 7.213

Now, as the king was in great strait, and knew not how he should deal with the emergency, Ephialtes, the son of Eurydemus, a man of Malis, came to him and was admitted to a conference. Stirred by the hope of receiving a rich reward at the king’s hands, he had come to tell him of the pathway which led across the mountain to Thermopylae; by which disclosure he brought destruction on the band of Greeks who had there withstood the barbarians. This Ephialtes afterwards, from fear of the Spartans, fled into Thessaly; and during his exile, in an assembly of the Amphictyons held at Pylae, a price was set upon his head by the Pylagorae. When some time had gone by, he returned from exile, and went to Anticyra, where he was slain by Athenades, a native of Trachis. Athenades did not slay him for his treachery, but for another reason, which I shall mention in a later part of my history: yet still the Spartans honoured Athenades none the less. Thus then did Ephialtes perish a long time afterwards.

**Who is the traitor and what are his motives?**

**Why do you think Herodotus spend time discussing his fate after the battle?**

**The Last Day of Battle**

**Now Herodotus focuses our attention on Leonidas in this moment of crisis and decision. Try to imagine how you would handle this situation if you were the Spartan commander.**  
Herodotus' *Histories*, 7.220

It is said that Leonidas himself sent away the troops who departed, because he tendered their safety, but thought it unseemly that either he or his Spartans should quit the post which they had been especially sent to guard. For my own part, I incline to think that Leonidas gave the order, because he perceived the allies to be out of heart and unwilling to encounter the danger to which his own mind was made up. He therefore commanded them to retreat, but said that he himself could not draw back with honor; knowing that, if he stayed, [glory awaited him](http://www.battle-of-thermopylae.eu/gallery.html" \l "spartans" \t "_blank), and that Sparta in that case would not lose her prosperity. For when the Spartans, at the very beginning of the war, sent to consult the oracle of Pythian Apollo concerning it, the answer which they received from the Pythoness was “that either Sparta must be overthrown by the barbarians, or one of her kings must perish.”   
  
The remembrance of this answer, I think, and the wish to secure the whole glory for the Spartans, caused Leonidas to send the allies away. This is more likely than that they quarreled with him, and took their departure in such unruly fashion (7.220).

**Why do you think Herodotus offers so many possible motives for the actions of Leonidas and the Greek allies?**

**What does Leonidas hope to gain from staying?**

**Why would Leonidas believe that the Spartans must remain at Thermopylae? How would this help Greece overall in the battle to defend itself?**

##### **The Battle Ends**

**In the end only a much reduced force is left to defend the Hot Gates: the Spartans, the Thespians, and the Thebans.**  
Herodotus' Histories, 7.222-223

At sunrise Xerxes made libations, after which he waited until the time of day when the forum is accustomed to fill, and then began his advance. Ephialtes had instructed him thus, since the descent of the mountain is much quicker, and the distance much shorter, than the way round the hills, and the ascent. So the barbarians under Xerxes began to draw near; and the Greeks under Leonidas, as they now went forth determined to die, advanced much further than on previous days, until they reached the more open portion of the pass. Hitherto they had held their station within the wall, and from this had gone forth to fight at the point where the pass was the narrowest. [Now they joined battle beyond that point](http://edsitement.neh.gov/edsitements-persian-wars-resource-pages" \l "Thermopylae" \t "_blank), and carried slaughter among the barbarians, who fell in heaps. Behind them the captains of the Persian squadrons, armed with whips, urged their men forward with continual blows. Many were thrust into the sea, and there perished; a still greater number were trampled to death by their own soldiers; no one heeded the dying. For the Greeks, reckless of their own safety and desperate, since they knew that, as the mountain had been crossed, their destruction was nigh at hand, exerted themselves with the most furious valor against the barbarians.

**Do you think Herodotus favors the heroism of the Greeks?**

**How might the story be different from a Persian Perspective?**

Herodotus' Histories, 7.224-225

By this time the spears of the greater number were all shivered, and with their swords they hewed down the ranks of the Persians; and here, as they strove, Leonidas fell fighting bravely, together with many other famous Spartans, whose names I have taken care to learn on account of their great worthiness, as indeed I have those of all the three hundred.   
  
Thus two brothers of Xerxes here fought and fell. And now there arose a fierce struggle between the Persians and the Spartans over the body of Leonidas, in which the Greeks four times drove back the enemy, and at last by their great bravery succeeded in bearing off the body. This combat was scarcely ended when the Persians with Ephialtes approached; and the Greeks, informed that they drew near, made a change in the manner of their fighting. Drawing back into the narrowest part of the pass, and retreating even behind the cross wall, they posted themselves upon a small hill, where they stood all drawn up together. Here they defended themselves to the last, those who still had swords using them, and the others resisting with their hands and teeth; till the barbarians, who in part had pulled down the wall and attacked them in front, in part had gone round and now encircled them upon every side, overwhelmed and buried the remnant which was left beneath showers of missile weapons. (7.225)

**What do you think would motivate the Spartans to fight so fiercely over the body of the slain Leonidas?**

**Do you believe such a struggle ever actually took place? Could it have taken place given the other details of the battle?**

Herodotus' Histories, 7.226

Thus nobly did the whole body of Spartans and Thespians behave; but nevertheless one man is said to have distinguished himself above all the rest, that was Dieneces the Spartan. A speech which he made before the Greeks engaged the Medes remains on record. One of the Trachinians told him, 'Such was the number of the barbarians, that when they shot forth their arrows the sun would be darkened by their multitude.' Dieneces, not at all frightened at these words, but making light of the Median numbers, answered 'Our Trachinian friend brings us excellent tidings. If the Medes darken the sun, we shall have our fight in the shade.'

**The Final Act**

Herodotus' Histories, 7.238

When Xerxes had thus spoken, he proceeded to pass through the slain; and finding the body of Leonidas, whom he knew to have been the Spartan king and captain, he ordered that the head should be struck off, and the trunk fastened to a cross. This proves to me most clearly, what is plain also in many other ways—namely, that King Xerxes was more angry with Leonidas, while he was still in life, than with any other mortal. Otherwise, he would not else have used his body so shamefully. For the Persians are accustomed to honor those who show themselves valiant in fight more highly than any nation that I know. They, however, to whom the orders were given, did according to the commands of the king.

**What have you learned from reading Herodotus that might alter your understanding of the battle of Thermopylae?**

**What parts of the narrative seem to reinforce the fact that Herodotus was a Greek and not a Persian?**

**What parts of the narrative would you object to in Herodotus' retelling if you were a Persian who had fought in the battles or who knew someone who fought for Xerxes?**

**Historical Accuracy Paper**:

Using this packet and the notes you have taken from watching the movie *The 300*, compare the two versions of the story. You must find 8 incidents in the movie and compare them to Herodotus’ narrative. You must cite the scene in the film and then cite a part of the text that you think corresponds to the film. You must then explain how the scene is similar or different to the film. Your comparison should be typed, double-spaced 12 pt font. You should number each comparison as 1-8 so I can see clearly each one. You must include at least 2 differences and 2 similarities. The 4 others I leave to your choice. This will be worth 40 points.

You must also respond to the following prompt. To get full credit of 10 points you must write 1 paragraph. If you would like to earn 40 extra credit points you may write an essay between 1.5-3 pages, double spaced, 12 pt font:

Historians would suggest that misunderstandings between East and West have been around since the battles between the Greeks and Persians. The movie *The 300* came out in 2006 during the height of the “War on Terror” and amid growing American fears about Islamic Fundamentalists. This “War on Terror” is the modern day version of the East/West clash portrayed in the movie.

Does the movie portray the superiority of the West (the Greeks or the US) over the East (Persians or Muslims)?

Does the movie reinforce “racism” or “Islamaphobia” through its plot structure, dialogue and choice of actors?

Given what we know about the Persian Empire from reading Herodotus and our studies in this class, does the movie represent this view accurately, or does it seek to promote a historically inaccurate agenda?

Explain and support your answer with examples from the film and from class.

**Additional readings supplements for this assignment can be given out by request in class.**

**Due Date: This entire packet and Paper are Due Thursday November 14 at 11:59 PM in electronic form emailed to** [**mrgarnershistory@gmail.com**](mailto:mrgarnershistory@gmail.com)