Were the Spartans Fighting for a Compromised View of Freedom at Thermopylae?

YES: Paul Cartledge, from "To Die For?" History Today (August 2002)

NO: Byron Farwell, from "The Spartan Way," World and I (March 1999)

ISSUE SUMMARY

YES: Cambridge University Professor of Greek History Paul Cartledge argues that the Spartan notion of freedom was predicated on their enslavement of an underclass of Helots, thus creating a compromised view of freedom.

NO: Military historian Byron Farwell finds a more complicated relationship between the Spartiates who enjoyed full citizenship and the Helots who fought beside them at Thermopylae.

When Xerxes, Great King of the Persians, undertook the conquest of the Greeks, this clash of civilizations focused in an epic battle at Thermopylae (the "hot gates"), a mountain pass near thermal spas that barred the Persian horde from Europe. This campaign was a return engagement for the Persians. Having been defeated by the Greeks at Marathon, a city 26 miles outside the city of Athens ten years earlier (a runner covered the 26 miles and died after delivering the news of victory to the Athenians), the Persians had carefully assembled a massive fighting force and a strategy designed to conquer Europe and bring it within the scope and power of the Persian Empire. King Leonidas of Sparta commanded an advance force of, perhaps, 7000 men, with an elite component that has come to be known as the 300 Spartans.

Each side saw the other as a hegemon, set on world domination. The Greek historian, Herodotus, quotes Xerxes as declaring, "Either our empire must pass under the dominion of the Greeks, or their land become the prey of the Persians; for there is no middle course left in this quarrel." Having repulsed Darius I, father of Xerxes, at Marathon, the Greeks were equally aware of this cultural conflict; and they had no desire to be swallowed up by the Persian Empire. Both sides believed themselves to be fighting for freedom. To Xerxes
and the Persians, who were Zoroastrians (an early monotheism), the polytheistic Greeks, with their amoral gods, seemed spiritually inferior. The Greeks, for their part, saw the Persians as barbarians who did not share what they saw as the superior Greek culture.

Freedom was sacred to the Greeks. However, for the Spartans, freedom was quite a complex concept. In their highly stratified society, only the Spartiates, a military master race, had voting rights. A second class, the Perioikoi or Neighbors, were free men who fought alongside the Spartiates but had no voting rights. Most problematic were the Helots, a conquered indigenous population, who worked the farms the Spartiates owned but were forbidden to cultivate and fought alongside them when ordered to do so, but who had no rights at all. Freedom for the Spartans seemed to mean their own political freedom as well as the continuing freedom to profit from the unfree Helots.

Before setting out to conquer Europe, Xerxes, a young man of 38, had two dreams/visions, in which a “tall and beautiful man” urged him on, threatening that if he faltered, “Thou art grown mighty and puissant in a short space, so likewise shalt thou within a little time be brought low indeed.” Leonidas, past 60, recalled the prophecy of Apollo’s priestess, the Oracle at Delphi, that “either Sparta would be destroyed by the barbarians or the king of Sparta would be destroyed” and elected to stand his ground with an elite force of Spartan fighters in a much praised but suicidal engagement. Was the Spartan idea of freedom worth dying for or too compromised to remain a noble ideal? The “Yes” side explores the complications of Helot unfreedom. The “No” side introduces a more subtle relationship between Spartiates and Helots.
To Die For?

The events of September 11th, 2001, jolted many of us into rethinking what was distinctive and admirable—or at least defensible—about Western civilisation, values and culture. Some of us were provoked into wondering whether any definition of that civilisation and its cultural values would justify our dying for them, or even maybe killing for them. Those of us who are historians of ancient Greece wondered with especial intensity, since the world of ancient Greece is one of the principal taproots of Western civilisation. As J.S. Mill put it, the battle of Marathon fought in 490 BC between the Athenians with support from Plataea and the invading Persians was more important than the Battle of Hastings, even as an event in English history. So too, arguably, was the battle of Thermopylae of ten years later. Although this was a defeat for the small Spartan-led Greek force at the hands of the Persians, it was nonetheless glorious or culturally significant for that. Indeed, some would say that Thermopylae was Sparta’s finest hour.

The Spartans were the Dorian inhabitants of a Greek city-state in the Peloponnese that for many centuries was one of the greatest of Greek powers. But who were they really, these Spartans? That question was supposedly asked in about 550 BC by the Persian Great King Cyrus, as reported by Herodotus. Three generations later, Cyrus’s successor Xerxes found out all too painfully who they were, and what they were made of: a fighting machine strong enough, skilful enough and sufficiently iron-willed to repel his hordes from the attempt to incorporate the mainland Greeks in his oriental empire already stretching from the Aegean in the West to beyond the Hindu Kush. He discovered these things in person, at Thermopylae. Although this was formally a defeat for the Spartan forces under King Leonidas, the battle constituted a massive morale victory for the Greeks, and the following year the army Xerxes had left behind in Greece was decisively defeated in a pitched battle at Plataea, principally at the hands of the drilled and disciplined Spartan hoplite phalangetes (heavy infantry) commanded by the Spartan regent Pausanias.

Thus, one not insignificant reason why today we should care who the ancient Spartans were is that they played a key role—some might say the key role—in defending Greece and so preserving a form of culture or civilisation that constitutes one of the chief roots of our own Western civilisation. That, at any rate, is certainly arguable. It helps to explain why 2002 might be called the Year of Sparta, rather as 2004 is to be the Year of Athens—and by extension of ancient Olympia and the Olympics.
This year there is a remarkable focus of academic and popular interest in the ancient Spartans. Two television series, one to be aired in over 50 countries on the History Channel, one on the UK’s Channel 4; two discussion panels at international scholarly conferences, one to be held in the States (the Berkshire Women’s History Conference), one in Scotland; and two international colloquia taking place in modern Sparta itself, one organised by Greek scholars, including members of the Greek Archaeological Service, the other by the British School at Athens (which has been involved with research in and on Sparta since 1906 and is currently seeking the funding to establish a research centre in the city). What can there possibly be still to talk about that merits focusing all this attention on ancient Sparta?

To begin with, Sparta, like some other ancient Greek cities or places, has left its mark on our consciousness by way of enriching English vocabulary. The island of Lesbos, for example, has given us ‘lesbian’, and Corinth ‘corinthian’. But Sparta, prodigally, has given us not one but two English adjectives, and a noun besides: ‘spartan’, of course, ‘laconic', and, less obviously, ‘helot’.

To choose an illustration almost at random, a recent profile of the British Tory Party leader Iain Duncan Smith referred casually to his naval public school as ‘spartan’—and aptly so, at least in so far as the British public school system, as invented virtually by Thomas Arnold of Rugby in the nineteenth century and continued by, say, Kurt Hahn’s Gordonstoun in the twentieth, had been consciously modelled on an idea, or even a utopian vision, of ancient Sparta’s military-style communal education.

The Spartan root of ‘laconic’ is not so immediately transparent, but it comes from one of the ancient adjetival forms derived from the name the Spartans more often called themselves by: Lacedaemonians. Diminutive but perfectly formed discourse can, according to Umberto Eco, be simply irresistible—and so it seemed to the Spartans, who perfected the curt, clipped, military mode of utterance, used in dispatches from the front or in snappy repartee to an insistent teacher, that we call laconic.

As for helot, the word is used to refer to a member of an especially deprived or exploited ethnic or economic underclass, and is a product of the dark underside of the Spartans’ achievement. Other Greek cities, not least Athens, were dependent on unfree labour for creating and maintaining a politicised and cultured style of communal life. But the slaves of the Athenians were a polyglot, heterogeneous bunch, mainly ‘barbarians’ or non-Greek foreigners, and they were mostly owned individually. The unfree subordinate population of Sparta, by contrast, was an entire Greek people, or perhaps two separate peoples united by a common yoke of servitude, whom they conquered during the eighth century and collectively labelled Helots. The word probably meant ‘captives’, and the Spartans treated them as prisoners of war whose death sentence they had suspended so as to make them work under constant threat of death, in order to provide the economic basis of the Spartan way of life.

These three words are a small token of the fact that English and indeed European or Western culture as a whole have been deeply marked by the Spartan image or myth, what the French scholar Francois Olier neatly dubbed ‘le mirage
spartiate'. That phrase was coined in the 1930s, an era when Sparta—or rather ideas of how Sparta worked as a society—exercised a particular fascination for totalitarian or authoritarian rulers, most notoriously Hitler and pseudo-scholarly members of his entourage such as Alfred Rosenberg. Discipline, orderliness, soldierly hierarchy and subordination of individual endeavour to the overriding good of the state were among the Spartan virtues that most attracted them.

Yet it is not only for what intellectuals or politicians have made of Sparta, through the centuries, that Sparta remains a choice subject of study. It is also for what the Spartans really did achieve, most conspicuously on the battlefields of 480–479. Had it not been for the Spartans’ remarkably successful organisation of their society into a well-oiled military machine, and their diplomatic development of a rudimentary multi-state Greek alliance well before the Persians came to Greece, there would have been no core of leadership around which the Greek resistance could coalesce. Had it not been for the Spartans’ suicidal but heroic stand at Thermopylae, which showed that the Persians could be resisted, it is unlikely that the small, wavering and uncohesive force of loyalist Greeks would have had the nerve to imagine that they might one day win. But for charismatic Spartan commanders of the character and calibre of Leonidas (r.490–480) and Pausanias (regent, 480–c.471), the Greek land forces would have been critically weakened.

Finally, had the loyalist Greeks lost in 480–479, and the Persians absorbed the Greeks of the mainland as well as of the islands and the western Asiatic seaboard into their farflung empire, the ensuing Greek civilisation would have been immeasurably different from and, most would say, inferior to what actually evolved in the fifth and fourth centuries.

What did the Spartans bring to the Greek cultural feast, beyond playing a vital role in winning the war that made it possible at all? Different interpreters might stress different aspects of the classical Greek cultural achievement, to emphasise either those aspects that they find most admirable and imitable or the ones that they consider to have been the most influential on subsequent cultures of the European or Western tradition. I would privilege three qualities or characteristics above all: a devotion to competition in all its forms almost for its own sake; a devotion to a concept and ideal of freedom; and a capacity for almost limitless self-criticism.

The first two might be found equally strongly in either of the two exemplars of ancient Greek civilisation, Sparta and Athens. The third, however, was a peculiarly Athenian cultural trait and not a Spartan one at all. Or so contemporary Athenians liked to think—and many have subsequently agreed. Demosthenes, for example, stated to an Athenian audience that it was forbidden to Spartans to criticise their laws, and there was undoubtedly no Spartan equivalent of either the tragic or the comic drama competitions which provided the Athenians with two annual state-sponsored opportunities for self-examination. On the other hand, the Spartans were not quite the unhesitatingly obedient automata of Athenian propaganda. On occasion grumbling might turn into open defiance of authority, both individually and collectively. Even Sparta’s kings might be brought low, tried and fined—or, worse, exiled
under sentence of death. It would be fairer and more accurate to say that the Spartans' culture was not one that favoured, let alone encouraged, open dissent or argument.

As for the general Greek passion for freedom, it was said by Critias—an Athenian admirer, admittedly, who was also an extreme authoritarian thinker and politician, leader of the Thirty Tyrants regime (404–403)—that in Sparta there were to be found both the most free people in Greece, and the most unfree. By the most free he meant the Spartans themselves, or more precisely the Spartan master-class, who were freed by the compulsory labour of their enslaved workforce from the necessity of performing any productive labour apart from warfare. By the most unfree the author meant the Helots. These people were treated as a conquered population. They came to outnumber their Spartan masters manifold, and for that reason among others were constantly a source of fear, even terror, to them. In the 460s a massive Helot revolt, following a major earthquake that hit the town of Sparta directly, caused serious damage, psychological as well as political and economic. But the Spartans outmatched the Helots in terror in return. The first act of the Spartans' chief board of annual officials, the five Ephors, on taking office was to declare war in the name of the Spartan state on the Helots collectively, the enemy within. That meant that any killing of Helots by Spartan citizens, deliberate or otherwise, was officially sanctioned, even perhaps encouraged, and, crucially (the Spartans were hugely pious), was in religious terms free from ritual pollution.

The Helots, and the Spartans' severe treatment of them, at first puzzled and later disturbed the more sensitive Greek observers. Plato, for example, remarked that the helot system was the most controversial example of servitude in Greece. This controversy was heightened in Plato's lifetime, when, in the aftermath of a decisive defeat of Sparta by the Boeotians at Leuktra in 371, the larger portion of them, the Messenians, finally achieved their collective freedom and established themselves as free Greek citizens of the restored (as they saw it) free city of Messene. This autonomy was attained, moreover, after another collective revolt—something which slaves elsewhere in Greece could only dream of.

Spartan girls, unlike Athenian girls, underwent a form of state education, separate from the boys but comparably rigorous and physical; this entitled them to equal food rations to enable them to develop physical strength, especially for eugenic reasons. Spartan wives and mothers were not shrinking violets. They openly berated and chastised any hint of cowardice in their sons. They wept tears of pain if their son or husband came back safe but defeated from battle, tears of joy if he died in a winning cause. The laconic admonition 'With your shield, or on it', meaning either come back alive and victorious or come back dead and victorious, was credited to the archetypal Spartan mother. They ritually humiliated men who were thought to have remained unmarried for too long, or showed signs of not wanting to get married at all. They inherited and owned property, including land, in their own right. They slept with men other than their husbands, and got away with it, indeed sometimes were actually encouraged to do so—by their husbands.
So independent-minded were they that Aristotle (admittedly not the most liberated of ancient Greeks in his outlook on women) believed that in Sparta the men, for all their prowess on the battlefield, actually were ruled at home by their women. In the second book of his Politics he devoted considerable space to the defects as he saw them of Lycurgus’s arrangements, and no single factor did he reckon up more adversely than the excessively powerful position of the citizen women.

We should take at least some of this with a dose of salt. Our written sources are exclusively male and non-Spartan. Nevertheless, we may safely infer that Sparta was in vital respects seriously different, even alien, to the traditional Greek norms of political and social intercourse. That alone makes Sparta worth studying. Herodotus wrote that he agreed with the Theban poet Pindar that ‘custom was king’, in the sense that every human group believes that its own customs are not only better than those of others but absolutely the best possible. With Sparta, he was on to a winner. Here is an illustration from the seventh book of his Histories.

Shortly before Thermopylae, it was reported to Xerxes that the Spartans were combing and styling their long hair. He had been told, by an exiled Spartan former king in his entourage, that the Spartans feared the Law more even than his Persian subjects feared their Great King and that in obedience to their Law they would never flee in battle, no matter how greatly outnumbered, but stand firm either to conquer or to die. Xerxes had laughed, refusing to believe that men who coiffed their tresses before fighting would make serious opponents in the field. Yet events were soon to confirm the laconic statement reportedly made by the Spartan ex-king: ‘This is their custom before risking their lives’.

Modern Sparta is a charming provincial capital; a few miles to the west, in the foothills of the Taygetos range, lie the ruins of Mistra, once capital of the Byzantine Despotate of the Morea. Here in the fifteenth century, as the Ottoman Turks prepared for their final assault on Constantinople, a monk, George Gemistos Plethon, sat composing Platonist nostrums for regulating the ideal state of human co-existence.

That utopianism seems a world away from the down-to-earth and brutally efficient society of ancient Sparta. And yet the ideal encapsulated in the myth of Thermopylae still resonates, if not always with the happiest of consequences. It is the concept that there are values that are worth dying for. Taken in a destructive direction, as by fundamentalist suicide-bombers, that notion can be wholly repellent. Developed in the direction taken by Lycurgus, however, it can generate ideals of communal co-operation and self-sacrifice that qualify properly and justly for the honorific label of utopia.

I end with one of Lycurgus’s more long-lasting endeavours, his involvement—according to some sources—in the foundation of the Olympic Games (traditionally in 776 BC) and in the swearing of the first Olympic truce. That truce, partly religious and partly a pragmatic device to enable the Games to take place despite chronic inter-city warfare, is usually misunderstood. For once, though, a historical misunderstanding can be constructive today and in the future. Modern sport can too often be a form of war minus the shooting.
as George Orwell put it. But it need not be so, and it is possible for individuals to go faster and higher and be stronger without provoking or exploiting international hatred. The modern Olympic movement, including the Olympic Truce organisation based at Olympia itself, offers a mental as well as material space for overcoming the sort of lethal differences that continue to divide peoples and cultures. For that ideal, we have to thank, in part at least, a Spartan.
All were killed. No Spartan survived the final day of the Battle of Thermopylae. Deserted by their allies, even the Thespaeans, who had stood by the longest, the survivors of the three-hundred-man contingent sent by Sparta to face the massive invading army of Xerxes stood firm and fought. Each man knew his fate: death on this day in battle. No one lived to give an account of the slaughter and desperate valor of the final hours.

But what history cannot provide a skilled novelist can evoke, and there exists a rich historical background and much recent research on which to draw. In a new novel, Gates of Fire, Steven Pressfield has used both skillfully. His interest lies in the Spartan soldiers, their education, military training, and the army in which they served. To give his material a living voice, he has conjured up a survivor who lives long enough to bear witness and to describe the Spartan military system and the battle as it might have been. And it is here that the author falters. Characterization is not his strong point, but it hardly matters. His tale is an absorbing one.

Xeones, his protagonist, is a young man found on the field of battle grievously wounded and unconscious. He puzzled the Persians, for instead of the traditional felt cowl underneath his helmet he wore a dogskin cap of the sort worn by the Lakedaemonian helots (slaves), yet his shield and armor were fashioned of the finest bronze and etched with Hibernian cobalt. His crest denoted a full Spartiate, a Lakedaemonian of the upper class.

When he was able to speak, he continued to astonish, for he spoke in a compound of “the loftiest philosophical and literary language” and the “most crude gutter argot.” He was brought on a stretcher before King Xerxes, son of Darius, commander of the Persian host, who was eager to learn what sort of men these were who before his eyes had slain some twenty thousand of his best warriors. What sort of system produced such men? Thus does the author set the stage for an account of the life of a young man who became a “squire of the heavy infantry, a servant of the battle train” in ancient Greece.

A Survivor’s Story

Xeones was not born a Spartan. He was 10 when an Argive raiding party from a neighboring state killed his father and mother, destroyed their farm, and demolished their city-state. Together with a 13-year-old female cousin, Diomache, and
Bruxieus, an ancient, educated, but near-blind family slave, he escaped into the hills. The trio managed to survive unharmed until Xeones, caught trying to steal a goose, was crucified by its enraged owners and left to die. He was rescued by Diomache, but his ordeal left him with permanently crippled hands, hands that could never hold a spear but could, he discovered, pull the string of a bow. This became his weapon, and Apollo became his god.

By their second summer in the mountains, Xeones and Diomache, aided by two puppies they found and trained, had become accomplished hunters and fledgling savages. Bruxieus’ devoted attempts to educate and polish them had given them a smattering of philosophy and a nodding acquaintance with the poets, but their salvation, he was persuaded, lay in Athens, the only truly open city, center of freedom and culture, in Greece. Upon his death, in obedience to his wishes, they set out for the city. He was 12 and she 15. Full of hope, they told themselves that Diomache would soon find a husband and Xeones would easily find work as a sailor. But Athens was not the city of Bruxieus’ dreams. Diomache became a prostitute and eventually a nun. Xeones was captured by the Spartans.

After an unhappy year in which he was cast among the helots, he was taken into the service of Alexandros, a scion of one of Sparta’s noblest families and son of a polemarch, or war leader, who elevated him to the status of parastates pais, “a sort of sparring partner for the youths enrolled in the agoge, the notorious and pitiless thirteen-year training regimen which turned boys into Spartan warriors.”

Eager to prove himself a warrior, Alexandros took Xeones as his squire and followed, without permission, an army sent to fight the Antirhionians. In the next five years the Spartans launched twenty-one campaigns against other Greeks, and Xeones fought in many of them.

He proved himself a disciplined warrior and was elevated to a position as squire to Dienekes, a Spartan hero. His social position was much changed. His Scythian bow was returned to him; he was later able to take a wife, by whom he sired a son and daughter, but the reader learns nothing of the domestic side of his life.

Nothing is told in a rush. Pressfield has obviously done his homework and moves effortlessly back and forth in time and place to flesh out Spartan life in peace and war.

The Persians Are Coming!

Xerxes, having succeeded to the Persian throne on the death of Darius, assembled a great host for the invasion of Greece. There was no secret about this and the Greeks trembled, but Sparta failed to convince all the disparate Greek states to unite and oppose him. A few allies were collected, however, and the Spartans were determined to display the mettle of their men.

The Peloponnese was separated from the rest of Greece by a narrow mountainous neck of land. A road ran through this rugged stretch, skirting the mountains and passing close to the sea. This passageway was called Thermopylae (hot gates), for there were spas there and the remains of three ancient
gates. The Greeks decided to make their stand at the middle gate, known as the Phokian Wall.

Night had fallen when the Spartans and their allies reached the selected battlefield. Most of the local people, Phokians and Lokrians, had fled into the mountains. Stonemasons and engineers were summoned to construct a battle wall from the available stones. The engineers immediately fell to arguing about where and how it was to be built while the masons and soldiers stood idly by.

This impasse was solved by the Spartan battle king, Leonidas, a man well past 60, who simply picked up a boulder and put it in place. Then he set a second stone beside it and a third. Finally someone cried: “How long do you imbeciles intend to stand by gaping? Will you wait all night while the king builds the wall himself?” The men at once fell to. Nothing fancy. As Leonidas said: “A wall of stone will not preserve Hellas, but a wall of men.”

Around midnight a few of the local people reappeared and were welcomed. One of them had actually seen the Persian host and told chilling tales of the magnitude of Xerxes’ army, its vast quantities of supplies, and the skills of its warriors. He had seen the Persian archers practice; their arrows had blocked out the sun. Dionikos, who arrived to hear this, remarked coolly, “Good. Then we’ll have our battle in the shade.”

The Battle Begins

When the Persian advance guard of cavalry came into view, watch fires were set across the rocky plain in front of the wall. The area was soon blanketed with fire, smoke, and sea fog. Several days passed before the Persians could bring up their army and prepare for battle. Time the Greeks used to advantage. In the evenings they sat about their fires talking of fear and of courage, that of both men and women. One spoke of a Spartan woman who on learning that all five of her sons had been killed in a single battle asked only who was victorious. Assured that the Spartans had triumphed, she walked away dry-eyed, saying only, “Then I am happy.”

A Persian attempt to obtain an early surrender failed, the Spartans suggesting instead that the Persians surrender to them. It fell to the Thespians to repel the first Persian attack. When they fell back from exhaustion, “The Spartans came in frontally, eight deep at a double interval, allowing the Thespians to withdraw between the files.”

The Persian shields proved too small and fragile to protect them, and their light spears and lances snapped and shivered against the heavy bronze shields of the Greeks. The Spartans struck overhand with their spears and the Persians fell in droves, valiant but ineffective. “The slaughter surpassed the mind’s capacity to assimilate it,” said Xeones. Although the squires worked furiously, hauling away the corpses, “the earth grew, not littered with enemy bodies, but piled with them. Stacked with them. Mounded with them.” The Persians’ supply of men seemed limitless, but at last they were driven from the field.

The last attack of the day was made by Xerxes’ own household guards, picked champions of noble families, many of them the king’s own kinsmen.
Trained from birth “to draw the bow and speak the truth,” they were called the Immortals. There were ten thousand of them, fresh and eager for battle against the now fewer than three thousand near-exhausted Greeks. Even this elite corps was beaten back as night fell. In more than seven hours of fighting, the Greeks had driven off four assaults.

The squires now tended to the wounds of their masters. Xeones bathed the face of Dienekes, who had lost an eye, “sliced through, leaving a ghoulish socket of tissue and blood.” All night long the forges roared and smiths’ hammers sounded throughout the Greek camps, as spears, swords, and shields were repaired for the next day’s battle.

On the second day, the Persian weight of numbers took its toll. The Spartans and Thespaseans fought desperately to hold the wall, but by the day’s end, their numbers further decreased by new casualties, they fell back, reeling from exhaustion. Astonishingly, with victory within their grasp, the Persians hesitated; a sense of terror seemed to seize them. Suddenly, a mighty bellow sounded from the heavens. Lightning bolts blazed across the sky, and a storm descended. Crying “Zeus Savior! Hellas and freedom!” Leonidas led the Greeks in a counterattack that sent their enemies flying.

**Battle’s End**

With decisive victory an impossibility, Leonidas released all the surviving allies, and they wearily trudged homeward. The Spartans stayed. Even had they wanted to leave the field, this was made impossible, for a treacherous local Greek had led the Immortals through the mountains. After an all-night encirclement march, the Persians stationed themselves six miles to the rear. Then the surviving Spartans prepared to die fighting. Facing enemies to the front and rear, there was no question of the battle’s outcome. Squires and helots were, with their families, manumitted by Leonidas, and those on the field were given the arms and panoply of the fallen. Thus Xeones, again a free man, was found in the attire of a full Spartan warrior.

“At last came the tide,” said Xeones, “and within which one felt as a wave beneath the storming whims of the gods. . . . Chariots and Persian horsemen stampeded pell-mell into the Spartans.” They died to the last man. Xeones lived only long enough to finish his tale.

The day the Spartans were defeated at Thermopylae was also the day that ended Xerxes’ dreams of conquest, for the Persian fleet suffered a calamitous defeat in the Straits of Salamis, off Athens. Xerxes retreated to Asia, leaving behind an army of three hundred thousand to face the Greeks in the spring. Their defeat later on the plains of Plataea, primarily by the disciplined ranks of the full Spartan army, marked the end of Asian power in Greece and the beginning of the rebirth of Greek culture.

On the battlefield of Thermopylae a stone was raised, on which were carved the unforgettable words of the poet Simonides:

Tell the Spartans, stranger passing by, that here obedient to their laws we lie.
POSTSCRIPT

Were the Spartans Fighting for a Compromised View of Freedom at Thermopylae?

What does the word “freedom” mean to you? Is it possible or desirable to arrive at a universally accepted idea of what freedom means? There are, of course, parallels to the Greco-Persian Wars in the United States Civil War. Like the Spartans, the South was fighting to preserve a way of life that contained a complicated definition of freedom. In the twenty-first century, the West insists on a more comprehensive application of freedom. Freedom for all is the ideal at least, even if it is not always honored in practice. Is freedom divisible—open to some, closed to others?

Paul Cartledge, author of the “Yes” side, is a recognized authority in the world of classics and ancient history. Author and editor of more than thirty books, his two most recent books are The Spartans: The World of the Warrior-Heroes of Ancient Greece (The Overlook Press, 2002, 2003) and Thermopylae: The Battle That Changed the World (The Overlook Press, 2006). For a balanced examination of the Persians and the Greeks, see Thermopylae: The Battle for the West by Ernle Bradford (Da Capo Press, 1980). And the first Greek historian, Herodotus, remains a fascinating chronicler of the outer events and inner landscapes of both Xerxes and Leonidas. Some of his writings may be found in Michael Grant’s compilation Readings in the Classical Historians (Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1992). And Herodotus’s History is available online at http://classics.mit.edu/Herodotus/history.

The “No” side in this issue is a review of a historical novel, Gates of Fire by Steven Pressfield (Doubleday, 1998), which creates a fictional protagonist to embody a more nuanced relationship between Spartiates and Helots. A fine biography Leonidas: Hero of Thermopylae by Ian Macgregor Morris (Rosen Central, 2004) offers insights into the king who led the fight to the death. And there are DVDs from The Teaching Company (2006), Great Battles of the Ancient World, as well as from A&E Home Video (2006), Decisive Battles: The Ancient World. Finally, of course, there is a film 300, available now from Warner Home Video in a two-disc special edition. As you watch this film, ask yourself what point of view the director and co-writer Zack Snyder has taken in bringing Frank Miller’s graphic novel 300 to the silver screen. How effective is the storyteller, who appears at the beginning, drawing into his tale a group of Spartans the night before the battle?