History Strikes Back! The Portrayal of Greek and Roman History in Hollywood Films and How it Furthers the Discussion of History

Ethan P. Frost
Utah State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/etd

Part of the History Commons

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/etd/8436

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate Studies at DigitalCommons@USU. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Graduate Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@USU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@usu.edu.
HISTORY STRIKES BACK! THE PORTRAYAL OF GREEK AND ROMAN HISTORY IN HOLLYWOOD FILMS AND HOW IT FURTHERS THE DISCUSSION OF HISTORY

by

Ethan P. Frost

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

History

Approved:

Susan O. Shapiro, Ph.D. Danielle Ross, Ph.D.
Major Professor Committee Member

Alvaro Ibarra, Ph.D. D. Richard Cutler, Ph.D.
Committee Member Interim Vice Provost
of Graduate Studies

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
Logan, Utah

2022
ABSTRACT

History Strikes Back! The Portrayal Of Greek and Roman History in Hollywood Films and How it Furthers the Discussion of History

by

Ethan P. Frost, Master of Science
Utah State University, 2022

Major Professor: Dr. Susan O. Shapiro
Department: History

In an article published in 2009, Robert Rosenstone expressed disappointment in two films he played a role in developing: Reds (1981) and The Good Fight (1984). He expressed regret that the films did not reach his expectations as a historian. As a result, he wondered whether there was a point in historians being involved in the making of historical films.

This thesis focused on six historical films set in ancient Greece and Rome. The six films are Alexander the Great (1956), The 300 Spartans (1962), and 300 (2006) for Greek history; and The Last Days of Pompeii (1935), The Last Days of Pompeii (1959), and The Eagle (2011) for Roman history. In this thesis, these films were examined through the lenses of various topics. Two major questions were considered. The first question was historical: how accurately did these films portray the various aspects of the ancient Greek and Roman civilizations that were depicted in them? And the second question was historiographical: what did the historical accuracies (and inaccuracies) of these films say about how filmmakers present historical events to the public?
Throughout this process, this thesis attempted to answer Rosenstone’s question. In the end, his question was answered with a yes. It is worthwhile for historians to be involved with historical films because it furthers the process of educating others about history.

(184 pages)
In an article published in 2009, Robert Rosenstone expressed disappointment in two films he played a role in developing: *Reds* (1981) and the *The Good Fight* (1984). He expressed regret the films did not reach his expectations as a historian. As a result, he wondered whether there was a point in historians being involved in the making of historical films.

This thesis focused on six historical films set in ancient Greece and Rome. The six films are *Alexander the Great* (1956), *The 300 Spartans* (1962), and *300* (2006) for Greek history; and *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1935), *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1959), and *The Eagle* (2011) for Roman history. In this thesis, these films were examined through the lenses of various topics. Two major questions were considered. The first question was historical: how accurately did these films portray the various aspects of the ancient Greek and Roman civilizations that were depicted in them? And the second question was historiographical: what did the historical accuracies (and inaccuracies) of these films say about how filmmakers present historical events to the public?

Throughout this process, this thesis attempted to answer Rosenstone’s question. In the end, his question was answered with a yes. It is worthwhile for historians to be
involved with historical films because it furthers the process of educating others about history.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First off I wish to thank my advisor and mentor Dr Susan O. Shapiro. Your advice, words of encouragement, and helpful criticisms helped me write this thesis and sharpen my skills as a historian. I would also like to thank my committee for their support and assistance throughout the entire process.

I also give special thanks to my family and friends for their encouragement, suggestions, moral support, and patience as I worked to complete this thesis. I could not have done it without all of you.

Ethan P. Frost
## CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .................................................................................................................. iii
PUBLIC ABSTRACT ................................................................................................... v
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ............................................................................................... vii

CHAPTER 1: THESIS INTRODUCTION ................................................................... 1

CHAPTER 2: ANCIENT GREECE ............................................................................. 5
  2.1 Alexander the Great (1956) ............................................................................ 5
    2.1.1 Macedonian Warfare ............................................................................... 8
    2.1.2 Alexander's Conquests .......................................................................... 11
    2.1.3 The Cold War ....................................................................................... 14
  2.2 The 300 Spartans (1962) .............................................................................. 22
    2.2.1 Greek Battle Tactics ............................................................................. 26
    2.2.2 Spartan Society .................................................................................... 34
    2.2.3 The Cold War ....................................................................................... 36
    2.2.4 Conclusion ........................................................................................... 40
  2.3. 300 (2006) .................................................................................................. 42
    2.3.1 Spartan Family Life ............................................................................ 43
    2.3.2 The Iraq War ....................................................................................... 45
    2.3.3 "Remember us" .................................................................................. 47
  2.4 Greek Final Section: Greek Warfare and the Persians .................................. 53
    2.4.1 Greek Warfare ..................................................................................... 53
    2.4.2 Persians .................................................................................................. 60

CHAPTER 3: ANCIENT ROME .............................................................................. 71
  3.1 The Last Days of Pompeii (1935) .................................................................. 71
    3.1.1 Gladiators ............................................................................................ 72
    3.1.2 Roman Society and Architecture ......................................................... 79
    3.1.3 Christianity ......................................................................................... 84
  3.2 The Last Days of Pompeii (1959) .................................................................. 89
    3.2.1 Roman Government ............................................................................ 91
    3.2.2 The Cult of Isis .................................................................................... 95
    3.2.3 Christianity ......................................................................................... 98
3.3 The Eagle (2011) ............................................................................................................. 107
  3.3.1 The Roman Military Machine ................................................................................ 110
  3.3.2 The Ninth Legion ................................................................................................... 120
  3.3.3 Mithraism and Mystery Cults ................................................................................. 130
3.4 Rome Final Section ...................................................................................................... 139
  3.4.1 Rome as the looking glass of the United States ...................................................... 139
  3.4.2 Pompeii .................................................................................................................... 147
CHAPTER 4: THESIS CONCLUSION ...................................................................................... 154
WORKS CITED .................................................................................................................. 165
CHAPTER 1: THESIS INTRODUCTION

In this thesis I will examine six films that cover ancient Greece and Rome and consider how history is presented to the public in the form of film. Every generation has felt the influence of film from the early 1900s (Schenk 2017, 37). Because of the extensive range of films through history, this thesis will discuss films that were produced over a considerable span of time, from the 1935 version of The Last Days of Pompeii and the 1956 version of Alexander the Great all the way to The Eagle from the year 2011.

In his book, Ancient Greece in Film and Popular Culture, Gideon Nisbet describes the experience of being “in the cavernous dark. We are spectators, from an unseen point behind us, projected light throws flickering images onto a wall before our eyes” (Nisbet 2006, 1). He goes on to describe how we jump at shadows and how we thrill at empty spaces on the wall. What is Nisbet describing? We would assume a movie theater and this would be a fair assumption. But Nisbet explains that he was quoting from Plato’s Cave, a famous allegory used by the philosopher Plato (Republic 514a-521c). In this allegory, Plato describes humanity as a race possessed with the desire to feel sensation. But as humans, we also have a greater ability to think than any other form of life on our planet. While the bear or the crocodile would care little for the past, we do because it is interesting to us and we seek a way to feel connected to others.

As a result, historical films receive special attention. This brings conflicts among filmmakers, historians, and the general audience regarding the purpose of historical films. Alastair Blanshard believes that some artistic license is required when making a historical film because producers tend to be less tolerant of cracks or gaps in the historical record.
For this reason, it becomes necessary for the filmmakers to fill in the gaps, or to “plaster over the cracks in the pursuit of a seamless realism” (Blanshard 2011, 4). The ancient world is not the only period where there is a lack of information. John Aberth writes that “the Middle Ages is perhaps one of the most difficult eras of history for modern audiences, as well as their cinematic entertainers, to imagine” (Aberth 2003, vii). Aberth and Blanshard see these inaccuracies as necessary evils to keep a smooth plot for the audience (Aberth 2003, x; Blanshard 2011, 4).

Konstantinos Nikoloutsos is skeptical about this and counters that the producers “perceive accuracy not as fidelity to surviving sources but paradoxically as an attempt to surpass the visual opulence and grandeur of previous cinematic recreations of antiquity” (Nikoloutsos 2017, 111). In other words, the authenticity of cinema would be an accident because the main goal of the film is to outdo the other films in grandeur. This is not far from the truth; filmmaking is a business first and foremost and producers are not shy about inserting their own touches into the film.

Hayden White’s article, “Historiography and Historiophoty,” claims that written history is actually very much like a film, because written history too can be distorted. The difference is that written history holds more legitimacy because it comes from documented sources. Yet White believes that even written historical accounts lack validity (White 2009, 54). He argues that historians use visual evidence, such as photos and films, as another source to be read like a written document, while the visual evidence should be used to complement other sources (White 2009, 54). These sources face the danger of whether or not they are adequate (White 2009, 54). In the end, the argument comes down to a historian's interpretation. Towards the end of the article, White writes
that even historians fall into the trap of labeling historical actors with character types (White 2009, 58). It is with these thoughts that White closes with his interpretation of historical films reflecting our understanding of an authentic past (White 2009, 59).

The historian Robert Rosenstone questions whether there is even a point to historians being involved in historical films because the historical record is so distorted when it is finally put on the screen. He wonders whether it is still worth it (Rosenstone 2009, 34). Rosenstone has a few valid concerns. The film industry feels the need to embellish information for the sake of creating a film that sells. Even if a film tries to use the sources faithfully, the filmmakers must ensure that the film is not too long or it will risk boring the audience. On the other hand, films are important to our world and history is used to inspire films. These films are the average person’s contact with the past and they use film as their source for understanding history, especially if a historical film says that it is based on a true story. This creates a window of opportunity for historians to start educating others about the past and enables them to use the film as the centerpiece of the discussion. I will say yes, it is worth it to be involved.

This is where I will fit into my field of study. I will use my thesis as an example of how films can be used as an asset to present history to the general public. I will continue with Rosenstone’s argument and expand on it. I will discuss how historians can use film as a fun way to teach others about the past.

The two central chapters of this thesis will discuss films on Greek and Roman history respectively, and each chapter has been separated into four sections. The films on Greek history are Alexander the Great (1956), The 300 Spartans (1962), and 300 (2006), while the films concerned with Roman history are The Last Days of Pompeii (1935), The
Last Days of Pompeii (1959), and The Eagle (2011). I picked The 300 Spartans (1962) and 300 (2006) because the two films present the Battle of Thermopylae (480 BC). I wanted to compare the presentation and the issues expressed from the two films, because the films were made at different points in history. I picked The Last Days of Pompeii (1935) and The Last Days of Pompeii (1959) because the two films were different versions of the same story. Both films are based on the book The Last Days of Pompeii written by Edward Bulwer-Lytton (published in 1834), and I wanted to look at two different interpretations of the story. I selected Alexander the Great (1956) because Alexander was an important historical figure and some of my sources touched on this particular film. Lastly I selected The Eagle (2011) because it was one of my favorites growing up and I was always interested in the mystery of the Ninth Legion.

The discussions of each film will be divided into sections in which I treat specific topics raised by the film and discuss the historical accuracy of the characters and events. However, this thesis is concerned with more than just historical facts. This thesis also explores various motivations of the producers and demonstrates that historical films can serve as an entertaining way for the movie-goer to learn more about history. Furthermore, this thesis expresses how we, living in the 21st century, share more things in common with our kin of antiquity than we expect. The medium has changed with the times, but the topics remain the same.
CHAPTER 2: ANCIENT GREECE

2.1 Alexander the Great (1956)

*Alexander the Great* (1956) tells the story of the life of Alexander the Great from his beginning as prince of Macedon to his major achievement as the conqueror of the Persian Empire. As he grows, Alexander learns the art of war from his father’s companions and is tutored by Aristotle. Later, Alexander accompanies his father, King Philip, to war and is present when Philip is assassinated at a wedding after the war. After his father is killed, Alexander becomes king. And not long after this, he begins to conquer more territory. The film shows Alexander’s conquests which reach a climax with the conquest of the Persian Empire. After his victories, Alexander alienates his Macedonian followers as he tries to integrate some Persian noblemen into his inner circle. At his wedding to Roxane of Susa, Alexander becomes ill. Eventually Alexander dies and when he is asked who will inherit his kingdom, he whispers “To the strongest.”

Early in the film, King Philip is shown on campaign with the goal of conquering all of Greece. One of his advisors tells him that a god was born to him. Because of legends of Greek gods sleeping with mortal women, Philip is suspicious and fears that his wife is cheating on him. However, his advisor convinces him to accept Alexander as his heir for the sake of peace. Although the film brings up the idea of Olympias cheating on her husband, there is no evidence that Philip suspected Olympias of infidelity and Bradford says that Philip was pleased with the news that he had a son (Bradford 1992, 20). These legends of Alexander having an extraordinary birth originated when Alexander became king (Roisman and Worthington 2010, 188).

By the time Alexander died in 323 BC, he had conquered the known world. His empire included Macedon, Greece, and Egypt, and stretched from Israel and Turkey to
the borders of India. He never lost a battle, despite the fact that he was frequently outnumbered, and even to this day, his tactics are studied in military academies around the world. Despite an early death at age 33, he left a footprint in the culture of Western civilization. As a result, there are many myths and stories about this extraordinary figure, and the film, *Alexander the Great*, is one of them.

This section covers the film *Alexander the Great*. In this section I will explore three topics presented in the film: the presentation of Macedonian warfare, Alexander’s conquests, and how the film fits into the Cold War period, in which it was made.

I plan to cover Macedonian warfare because it is an excellent example of the kinds of mistakes that are made in historical films and demonstrates the benefits of involving historians in the creation of historical films. In *Alexander the Great*, the Macedonian soldiers are shown carrying standard spears instead of pikes. This is incorrect. Anthony Snodgrass explains that the Macedonian phalanx, with its unique armor and equipment, was the reason why Philip of Macedon was able to conquer the Greeks (Snodgrass 2013, 92). There are a few scenes in which the film does show the Macedonian phalanx carrying pikes, but the Macedonians are not using the pikes in battle.

The section on Alexander’s conquests will discuss how the filmmakers followed historical accuracy in some respects, but in others, they seem to have cared more about making a popular film. The filmmakers got the dates and information about the battles correct, but they made mistakes about the motives for Alexander's conquests. In the film, Alexander is depicted as wanting to bring all peoples of the world together as a brotherhood of man. The historical Alexander was more complicated, however.
Sometimes he claimed to desire to avenge the invasion of Persia, but other times, he felt he was in a rivalry with his father and the heroes of the *Iliad*. The historian Worthington says that Alexander was a man who had demons (Worthington 2014, 6). Worthington describes the difficulty of separating the historical Alexander from the legend of Alexander. Worthington notes that Alexander was an accomplished statesman and a great general, but he also states there is a legend about Alexander that presents him as a great unifier and idealist philosopher (Worthington 2004, 6). Worthington's analysis helps to explain the way that Alexander is presented in the film. *Alexander the Great* (1956) is an example of how the historical Alexander and the legend of Alexander have become intertwined. This raises the question of who the historical Alexander was whether he can be separated from the legend. The historian Shahabudin likewise comments that “Rossen’s film gives us, on the one hand, the military and political conquests of the soldier-king and, on the other, the romantic heroizing of the man” (Shahabudin 2010, 94). In discussing these topics, this thesis will add to the discussion about the history and the legend of the greatest conqueror in the world of antiquity.

The section covering the Cold War will talk about the standoff between the Soviet Union and the American led NATO. *Alexander the Great* (1956) was made during the height of the Cold War (which lasted from 1947 to 1989) and it clearly conveys the tone of this geopolitical struggle. The film gives the message that just as Alexander wanted to create a brotherhood of man, so the Americans are promoting their culture as a noble, unifying endeavor.

What can be learned from looking at these sections? Who would care about the presentation of Macedonian warfare, Alexander’s conquests and how the film fits into a
Cold War setting? Why should it matter? The conclusion of this section will address this question and explain why it matters.

2.1.1 Macedonian Warfare

We are introduced to the Macedonian army about five minutes into the film. In the film, the Macedonians at war look impressive at casual glance. The ranks of the soldiers march behind King Philip with red tunics, spears, armor, and helmets. About an hour later, we see the Macedonian army again as Alexander sets out to conquer the Persian Empire. The shots display the Macedonian army carrying spears and shields, and wearing armor like that of a Greek hoplite. The Macedonian army looks as if it is supported with archers and cavalry, and this is historically accurate.

However, in some respects the weaponry shown in the film is problematic. There are no pikes shown in the battles or held by the army except for a single scene. Furthermore, the Macedonians are presented with tower shields, which is inaccurate. Instead of depicting the Macedonian army in Greek armor, the film shows the Macedonian army as wearing armor that looks like a fusion of Rome and Greek armor. For example, the Macedonian army is shown with helmets that have red crests and a wide face, which is characteristic of Roman helmets. The reason for this inaccuracy is that Hollywood did not have authentic Greek armor to use and relied on a fusion of Greek and Roman armor for costumes. During the Cold War, ancient Greece was a relatively new setting for films and film companies “lacked the means of manufacturing the large number of period costumes required for a historical epic with thousands of extras” (Nikoloutsos 2013, 275).
The weapons of the Macedonian army were based on the traditional Greek hoplite weaponry. A hoplite is a Greek heavy infantry soldier fighting in a close formation. A standard hoplite had a large shield which protected his left side. On his head, the hoplite would wear a Corinthian helmet which restricted a hoplite’s hearing and vision (Viggiano and van Wees 2013, 60). The hoplite armor had a breastplate, with arm guards, thigh guards, shin guards, and leather straps protecting the shoulders. The hoplite carried a spear as a primary weapon and a sword that was only drawn if something happened to the spear.

By the time of Alexander the Great, the Macedonian soldiers used armor that was based on traditional Greek hoplite weaponry, but was modified by the innovations of Alexander's father, Philip of Macedon. Philip learned about Greek military tactics during his time as a hostage in Thebes (Ashley 1998, 35). After he ascended to the throne (359 BC), Philip went to work building the Macedonian army and he organized the Macedonian phalanx into a premier fighting force.

The reforms made by Phillip would change the history of phalanx warfare forever and shake the world to its core. One of the first reforms he made was adjusting the length of the spear, the primary weapon of the phalanx. Phillip transformed the spear into a pike by extending the length to 24 feet, thus creating the sarissa (Bradford 1992, 10). The sarissa gave the Macedonian phalanx greater reach and more importantly gave courage to the Macedonian soldiers (Bradford 1992, 10). Their armor was stripped to the bare minimum and the soldiers were encouraged to carry their own material (Ashley 1998, 6).

As noted above, the film depicts the Macedonian army as having the long pikes of the Macedonian army, but also as carrying tower shields, which is inaccurate. The armor
shown in the film represents a mix of Egyptian, Roman, and Greek armor.\(^1\) Furthermore, the film presents the battles between the Macedonian and Persian armies without any tactics; the armies are shown just running at each other. The second battle of note is the Battle of Gaugamela (331 BC), which occurs about two hours into the film. Again, the army is depicted in a mix of Greek and Roman armor. The pikes are mentioned, and the film gets some of the details right regarding how the Macedonians dealt with the Persian scythe chariots by using javelins. But all we see is the cavalry charge led by Alexander to capture Darius. In the film, Alexander is depicted fighting through infantry to get to Darius. Historically this did not happen; Alexander had to fight through rank after rank of cavalry to get to Darius (Worthington 2004, 133). Speaking of the infantry, this was one of few scenes in the film where we see the pikes. The producers miss the opportunity to show how lethal the Macedonian phalanx was in battle. Instead, the producers only focus on Alexander as a hero of a sword and sandal epic; they do not show him as the brilliant commander and strategist that he was.

*Alexander the Great* glosses over most of Alexander's conquests in a voice over. During the voiceovers, the film displays scenes of the sieges and the battles accompanied by words detailing the conquests. Although the film does stay true to the historical record in regards to the battles that were fought and when, it glosses over many details of the conquest (Coe 1956). This was done to prevent the film from becoming too long, but nonetheless it must be addressed. Nikoloutsos writes that the filmmakers' goal was not fidelity to the ancient sources but rather that they tried "to surpass the visual

---

\(^1\) This is my opinion. Some of the armor used by the Macedonians looks like it came from the film *the Ten Commandments* (1956).
opulence and grandeur of previous cinematic recreations of antiquity (Nikoloutsos 2017, 111).” In other words, any authenticity in a film based on ancient history was an accident since the main goal of the film was to outdo other films in grandeur. Another historical inaccuracy was the way in which the film portrays Alexander as a hero during this segment. To say that Alexander was a hero in our modern context would be historically inaccurate. The historical Alexander was more complicated and presented the complexity of the human soul.

2.1.2 Alexander's Conquests

Alexander was born into royalty in 356 BC with a king as his father; his mother was a princess of Epirus. He was born in a world of constant turmoil with three competing cultural and power groups: Macedonia, the Greek world, and the Persian Empire. These three civilizations were in a constant struggle for power. Alexander was born under unique and special circumstances. According to legend, the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus burned down and many believed it was because Artemis was attending the birth of Alexander (Worthington 2004, 30). When Philip heard the news of his son's birth, he received two other important messages: the Illyrians had been defeated, and his horse had won in the Olympic games. Philip was in a good mood because the soothsayer announced that a child born under three victories would be invincible (Bradford 1992, 20).

Because Alexander was born under these special circumstances, he was believed to be destined for greatness. His father ensured that the young prince received the best education possible. His tutor was the famed philosopher Aristotle who had a great influence on him. Alexander was taught the arts of war like any other young man of the
Macedonian aristocracy. He learned to ride a horse. In fact, he learned Persian horseback customs because his father adopted horse riding methods from Persia (Cartledge 2004, 190). He learned the art of warfare and hunting from men who lived in the rough places of Macedonia (Martin and Blackwell 2012, 11). From Aristotle and his other tutors he learned to appreciate Greek culture. Aristotle believed that barbarians were incapable of ruling themselves and needed to be ruled by Greeks (Worthington 2014, 35). Initially, Alexander agreed with his tutor, but after his conquests he appointed Persians in prominent positions and and did this for practical reasons (Worthington 2014, 35).

There are two discussions in the film that suggest this idea. The first discussion is between Alexander and Barstine, the wife of Menmon, a leader of the Greek anti-Macedon forces; this conversation takes place almost an hour into the film. In this scene, Alexander and Barstine are walking down a path together. Despite the normal lighting, it depicts Barstine in a white dress to show her off and cause her to stand out. Alexander mentions that Bartsine is a Persian name. She answers “I am both Persian and Greek. Athens is now my home. Both my husband and I love it very much.” Alexander responded “My father said that Athens is neither a state or place. It is an idea. I understand that now that I am here. And Aristotle taught me that an idea is greater than any man. It is divine. “ This discussion subtly brings up the idea of America to the audience and suggests that America is not just a nation but an idea. Also, it implies that anyone who immigrates to America can call themselves an American while still remaining true to what their heritage was. Athens had the reputation of being the first democratic government in the world. This idea is powerful. It was powerful for Americans because of a shared belief in representative government. Although America is
a republic, Americans are taught that they are citizens of a democracy that elects their leaders and representatives. Athens was the first democracy in the world and as a result, the memory and idea of Athens holds weight with Americans in terms of their identity. Even today, the idea of Athenian democracy is still strong. This scene shows a parable of American values in the idea of Athenian democracy. An idea such as democracy is divine and if it is divine, it means it cannot die but will only increase.

The second discussion, between Barstine and her husband, Memnon, takes place later in the film. Memnon is the general of the Greek mercenaries fighting for Persia. The scene is in a dark tent, but a subtle light surrounds Memnon and Barstine, showing that the two are of equal height. This gives a sense of equality of the two in the conversation. The conversation starts after Memnon has dismissed his officers. The two get into an argument because Barstine does not believe in Memnon’s cause of fighting against Alexander. She disproves how Memnon fights for the Persian nobles and king because she believes they do not value human lives. Memnon opposes Alexander because he believes him to be a tyrant. Barstine reprimands him, saying that the Persian empire he is fighting for is old and corrupt and begs for destruction. Memnon, taking a realistic perspective, says that the world begs for destruction. Barstine says “No, it needs a new force, a new idea!” She goes even further and says that she believes this idea has come to Asia and that it has come to Greece in the form of Alexander. She continues by saying “I am both Persian and Greek; I know both worlds. Perhaps the Athens in which we believed is old and corrupt too, but the ideas and glories are worth keeping alive in the hearts of men.” She continues, saying that Alexander's victory will bring these ideas to Asia. What ideas does Barstine believe are worth preserving? Clearly, the answer, once
again, is the idea of democratic Athens. Athens is seen as the first democracy, the first idea of freedom. In the film, Alexander calls Athens the center of civilization and culture.

These two discussions cause the audience to get the idea that Alexander’s war of conquest would be used to create a brotherhood of man. Historically, the situation was more complicated. Why would Alexander be portrayed as a unifier? What are the motives? The motives lie with the producers. According to Nikoloutsos, during the Cold War, the movie industry frequently generated parables “of contemporary Cold War geostrategic conflicts (Nikoloutsos 2017, 112).” In other words, these films present a parable of American values against those of the Soviet Union. It is quite possible that the producer, Robert Rossen, was motivated by such reasoning. And the underlying reason that caused these motives to exist in the first place was the rapid acceleration of the Cold War during the 1950s.

### 2.1.3 The Cold War

The Cold War (1947-1989) between the United States and the Soviet Union started soon after the Second World War ended (Gaddis 2005, 6). Although the two had been allies during World War II, these dominant powers each represented a different idea and could not share the same space together.²

During the 1950s, the relations between the Soviet Union and the United States were not the best. Already NATO and Communist forces fought one another in the Korean War and both sides had created the atomic bomb by the end of the year 1950

---

² Gaddis 2005, 6. The United States represented the ideas of representative government, individualism and capitalism, while the Soviet Union represented communism, the collective, and totalitarianism.
The victory of the Second World War did not create the security that was hoped for (Gaddis 2005, 46). By the time the film _Alexander the Great_ was released in 1956, Dwight D. Eisenhower was president and he favored a more proactive strategy than his predecessor, Harry S. Truman. Eisenhower, a veteran commander of the second World War, believed that if the United States got involved in a war against Communism, America should fight with anything they had including nuclear weapons (Gaddis 2005, 66). He ordered the military to plan for a total war in the exact hopes that because of this preparation no such war would take place. Matters got increasingly complicated, however, when the Soviets tested their first successful thermonuclear bomb in 1955 (Gaddis 2005, 68). The erratic behavior of Stalin’s successor, Khrushchev (1953 to 1964), did not help either. At the slightest provocation, Khrushchev would set off a tirade of threats toward the United States and its allies. To the average American, it felt like war with the Soviet Union was on the horizon and this was the political and historical climate in which _Alexander the Great_ was created.

The film _Alexander the Great_ not only presented an allegory of strategic conflicts, it also provided hope for the spreading of freedom against the tyranny of Communism. The message of the film is that the United States should not return to a period of isolationism. Instead, it should remain active to promote its ideals of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness all around the world. In this way, Alexander’s hope for the unity of mankind while fighting for freedom against tyranny is meant to represent contemporary American ideology. This idea of Alexander as trying to unify the ancient world under the concept of freedom possibly came from the ideas of William Woodthorpe Tarn. Tarn wrote a book, titled _Alexander the Great_, that was published in 1948, just after World
War II, when the United Nations had just come into being. In the book, he credited Alexander with the creation of a humanitarian doctrine of The Unity of Mankind (Martin and Blackwell 2012, 181).

*Alexander the Great* shows the unity of mankind coming to pass at the end of the film. On the trip back to Babylon, Alexander is wracked with guilt over the death of Cleitus, because he had killed his close friend during a drunken argument. Cleitus was one of Alexander’s generals who had saved his life at the Battle of the Granicus. Cleitus did not like Alexander adopting Persian customs. At this point there is a voice-over in which the narrator explains that Alexander realizes that he needs to win the hearts of man. The next scene is the mass wedding at Susa which the film presents as a way to unify the hearts of the Greek and Persian world. This wedding was created by Alexander in which many leading Macedonians married Persian aristocratic women in order to bring both groups of people together. At the wedding, Alexander prays that his empire will be based on the unity of man through common understanding and peace. “For” he says, “we are all like unto god.” The scene ends when Alexander collapses in sickness and the next scene shows his death. Although the film displays this as a tragic ending of what could have been, historically the events happened differently. The mass wedding happened in 324 BC, however it was not a symbol of unity as seen in the film, the Macedonian elites were not happy with the arrangement (Worthington 2004, 247).

In fact, Alexander left Macedonia with no plan for a brotherhood of man. Instead his conquest of Persia was an attempt to outdo the heroes of the past including his father Philip, who planned to conquer the Persian empire but died before he could make the attempt. Alexander was someone who refused to bask in the reflected glory of another
and sought to establish his own legend (Cartledge 2004, 97). When he arrived at the believed site of Troy, he considered himself the incarnation of Achilles and consecrated his armor and campaign to Athena (Worthington 2004, 72). After winning a battle, he sent suits of armor as a gift for Athena. However, when he conquered Egypt, Alexander offered sacrifices to their gods and one of the priests called him the son of a god. It is possible that this act gave Alexander the idea that he could be a unifier. However when he conquered Persepolis, the heart of the Persian Empire, Alexander torched the capital. Contrary to what is seen in the film, in which Alexander was a reluctant participant in this act, Alexander was a lead instigator of the sacking and burning of Persepolis, in order to avenge the destruction of Athens in the Persian War (480 BC). Although this did not sit well with the Persian aristocracy with whom he wanted to integrate, the Persian elites remained silent (Worthington 2004, 150). Alexander's attempts at blending Macedonian and Persian culture failed to take hold. The Macedonians and Greeks found it unsettling that Alexander favored the Persian elites (Martin and Blackwell 2012, 131-133).

Paul Cartledge notes that Alexander was defined by pragmatism in his dealings with the Persians. For this reason, he presented himself and his rule as a successor to the Persian empire (Cartledge 2004, 152). To Alexander this seemed natural, since the Persians were now a majority in his own empire. As a result, he sought to enact a policy of cultural mixing. This did not sit well with the Greeks and Macedonians because their Greek culture was extremely different from the Persian culture. But this mixing came naturally to Alexander because his father adopted horseback customs from Persia (Cartledge 2004, 190). Cartledge presents a more historically accurate view of Alexander, showing that he was like any conqueror who sought to control his hard-won
territory. In this view, Alexander's approach to empire seems like that of the Romans who had a tradition of tolerance as long as there were no rebellions.

The film also fails to depict Alexander’s paranoia and his constant suspicions of a conspiracy. When Alexander executed Philotas, the commander of the Companion Cavalry, on charges of treason, he feared that Philotas’s father Parmenion would kill him in revenge and so killed him on flimsy charges (Worthington 2004, 169). The omission of Alexander's irrational acts was done deliberately by the producers because they wanted Alexander to be the hero of the film. In the film, Alexander is presented as a man ahead of his time who saw all peoples as equal. About two hours into the film, he has one of his best Macedonian warriors battle a Persian because the Macedonian warrior had scoffed at the idea that the Persians were equal. Alexander had the men duel and the Persian won the duel, thus proving that Alexander was right. In this scene, the audience sees Alexander as promoting racial equality. However, while the historical Alexander did allow all people of merit to join his government and military, he insisted they learn Greek and Macedonian battle tactics (Martin and Blackwell, 2012, 131).

Although Alexander seemed to be forward thinking according to audiences of the 20th century, it could be argued these decisions were pragmatic. This prompts the question. Was the historical Alexander a pragmatist or a visionary? Towards the end of his life, Alexander left detailed plans in his will for grand schemes that would unify his empire and expand it, a mixed realm ruled by Macedonians, Greeks, and capable men of any nation loyal to his vision. The plans included a thousand warships, larger than any ever seen, for a naval expedition to North Africa, Sicily, and Spain; they described a road, equipped with ports and shipyards, stretching from Egypt to the Pillars of Heracles, where the Mediterranean met the Atlantic; six great temples would be erected in Greece and Macedonia; finally – the
culmination of a vision of a mixed culture redefining power in the world – his plans called for new cities as homes for populations transferred from Asia to Europe and from Europe to Asia. As Diodorus reports, Alexander intended through intermarriages and homesteads, ‘to put the greatest continents into a partnership of harmony and love based on family ties.’ (Martin and Blackwell 2012, 167).

These plans are the origin of the idea that Alexander was a visionary, and they helped to create the legends that surrounded him. But was there any historical truth to these legends?

**Martin and Blackwell might provide an answer to this question.** As they explain:

“Many modern historians deny that Alexander’s actions were based on ideals. This seems like a failure of historical imagination” (Martin and Blackwell, 2012, 180). In Martin and Blackwell's view, some of Alexander’s ideas were inspired by a visionary plan (Martin and Blackwell, 2012, 180). Even today a great controversy surrounds the character of Alexander. Some see him as a hero while others insist that he is a villain. The truth is that no contemporary primary source records of Alexander the Great exist and all the sources that we have about him were written hundreds of years later. This makes it difficult to know exactly what Alexander was like because we only have late secondary sources and fiction as information about the life of this great conqueror.

As Shahabudin notes, Rossen’s film gives us, on the one hand, the military and political conquests of the soldier-king and, on the other, the romantic heroizing of the man (Shahabudin 2010, 94). The romantic heroizing view presents a man who wanted to bring mankind together in a kind of unity. But Martin and Blackwell believe that Alexander did not have a not a vision of “unity” or as Tarn calls it, “brotherhood” among peoples based on universal equality or sentimentality. In Martin and Blackwell's view,
Alexander did not believe in equality, instead he was ruthlessly competitive, violent to anyone who was disloyal to him, and supremely proud (Martin and Blackwell 2012, 183). Still, the historical record seems to show that Alexander had some notion that human beings were, or at least ideally should be, in some basic sense, united. This idea of human unity can be traced all the way back to the beginnings of Greek thought, and even Aristotle taught that humans shared a natural bond of affection with one another (Martin and Blackwell 2012, 182).

Perhaps there is no way to uncover the mystery of the historical Alexander. Some historians have an idealistic view of Alexander the Great as a legendary conqueror. It may be natural to see Alexander as legendary, because never has one man conquered so much and so quickly changed the historical landscape. But it is not clear that this view of Alexander is historically accurate. All we have to work with are late secondary sources. While these secondary sources were in part taken from primary sources, they are also based on myths and legends about the great conqueror (Worthington 2004, 3). Thus, our secondary sources present Alexander as a legendary hero, which leads to films adopting an idealistic account.

Yet the film, Alexander the Great, offers good insight into America's views of itself during the height of the Cold War. The scene of Barstine arguing with her husband Memnon about the belief that Alexander’s conquest will bring the idea of Greece to Asia is a good example. Just as Barstine had faith in the ideals of Athens, the producers could say that despite its flaws, America has a great deal of good to offer the world. The message of the film is that we should expand American values abroad against the evil empire of the Soviet Union. In this way, the movie industry was generating parables “of
contemporary Cold War geostrategic conflicts” (Nikoloutsos 2017, 112). Similarly, this film is a parable of American values against those of the Soviet Union. And the American values that are portrayed in this film are the values of freedom and cooperation among all mankind.

The film *Alexander the Great* brought ancient Greece to the attention of the American film-going public, but the film has several historical failings. The presentation of Macedonian warfare was lackluster. Although the producers got some ideas correct, the mix of Greek, Roman and biblical weapons and armor was disappointing. The battles were presented as epic sword and sandal scenes while the historical accuracy of battle scenes was considered less important. The conquests of Alexander were displayed in a voiceover by a narrator or by words shown on the screen with the result that the film gives minimal information about the conquests.

The presentation of Alexander's aims clearly shows how the film fits into the Cold War setting. The film came out in 1956, at the height of the Cold War, while America was trying to deal with the Soviets and with a possible threat of war. At this time, the threat of war was real. *Alexander the Great* can be seen as a form of psychological warfare to inspire Americans and to denigrate the Soviet Union. The film inspires Americans with the idea that although America was not perfect, it still had a lot of wonderful core ideals that it should share with the world. The film also presents America as the driving force for freedom and liberty to those living in the Soviet bloc.

In conclusion, *Alexander the Great* adds on to the already expansive story of Alexander. We have no surviving sources that present Alexander as a man. He became a legend when he was still alive and as a result, historians struggle to separate the myth
from the man. As a historian I suggest considering *Alexander the Great* as an extension of the historiography of Alexander. Just like our extant written sources, the film presents a mixture of the man and the legend.

2.2 *The 300 Spartans* (1962)

*The 300 Spartans* tells the story of the Battle of Thermopylae (480 BC) in which King Xerxes leads the army of the Persian Empire to conquer Greece. In Corinth, the Greek city-states agree to ally on the condition that Sparta will fight. The Spartan King Leonidas promises that Sparta will fight and with the aid of Themistocles, the Athenian statesman, forms a plan to hold the Persians at Thermopylae, making use of the narrow pass to channel the Persians and negate their numbers.

Leonidas returns to Sparta and discovers from his co-king Leotychidas that the ephors have decided to wait until after a religious festival to muster the Spartan army.\(^3\) The problem with this plan was that the Persians were going to arrive at Thermopylae before the religious festival was over. And if the Spartan army failed to appear, then Leonidas would have let down the allied Greek forces. However under Spartan law, Leonidas had the right to take his personal bodyguard of 300 soldiers to hold the pass until the religious festival was complete. At that point, according to the plan, the full Spartan army would join Leonidas and his bodyguard at the pass at Thermopylae. So Leonidas takes his force and joins with a force of Thespians. The Greek force arrives at

---

\(^3\) The government of classical Sparta included two kings, a council of elders, and five ephors, or overseers (Parker 2014, 102-103).
the pass of Thermopylae and they are able to fortify it before the Persians arrive. When the Persians arrive, the two sides fight for three days. During those three days the Greeks are able to hold the Persians at the pass and prevent them from marching into central Greece, even though they are heavily outnumbered.

Meanwhile, a Spartan warrior named Phyllon and his girlfriend Ellas are caught up in the battle. Ellas refuses the advances of a goat herder named Ephialtes and in revenge Ephialtes goes to Xerxes and betrays the Greeks for money. Ephialtes shows the Persians a goat track which allows the Persians to sneak round the Greek position. At this point, Leonidas discovers that the Spartan have decided to fortify the Isthmus of Corinth, which means that the Spartan army will not march north to Thermopylae, even after the religious festival is over. Thus, the battle at Thermopylae turns into a last stand where the Spartans and their allies fight to the end in which they are all killed. However a voiceover tells the audience that the war ended with a victory for Greece and ends with the words: "But it was more than a victory for Greece, it was a stirring example to free people throughout the world of what a few brave men can accomplish once they refuse to submit to tyranny!"

Forty five minutes into the film, the audience sees King Xerxes sitting on a throne of gold, copper, and fine wood with red carpet under a pavilion of fine cloth. He is overseeing his troops march past him and in the beginning, the soldiers chant "Xerxes! Xerxes!" He is in conversation with his advisors and talking about how ten years ago, his father sent a mere wave to conquer Greece. Then he declares "I am leading an ocean!" The music rises in a crescendo as if to declare an early triumph. While this scene invokes
powerful emotions in the audience, it also gives feelings of dread and fear which the historical Xerxes might have loved to witness upon seeing the size of his host.

Filmed in 1962, *The 300 Spartans* presents an epic story of a heroic struggle by the Spartans and the Greeks against the Persians. *The 300 Spartans* is based upon the historical event of the Battle of Thermopylae (480 BC), an important turning point in the Persian War (499-479 BC). The battle has traditionally been seen as a remarkable example of a heroic stand against all odds and remains an influential part of the culture of western civilization with multiple references in popular culture. *The 300 Spartans* was the first film of its kind to present this historic battle and it paved the way for other films about the battle of Thermopylae. Historian Paul Cartledge wrote: "The Battle of Thermopylae, in short, was a turning point not only in the history of Classical Greece but in all the world’s history, eastern as well as western" (Cartledge 2006, xii). *The 300 Spartans* is interesting because the producers took some information from the *Histories* of Herodotus, our most important ancient source about the Persian War, while altering some historical details in pursuit of an exciting plot for the audience.

This chapter of my thesis will examine three different themes: Greek battle tactics, Spartan culture, and how the film fits into a Cold War setting. My discussion of these themes will help answer the question of whether historians should stay involved in historical films. This chapter shows the potential for audiences to learn valuable information when watching a historical film.

The section on Greek battle tactics will examine the tactics surrounding the battle of Thermopylae. Contrary to popular culture, the battle served as a holding action until the rest of the Greek army arrived. This is emphasized in the film. At the beginning of the
film, Leonidas and Themistocles pick Thermopylae to hold the Persians at bay until the rest of the Greek army could mobilize. This has a historical basis; the Greek army at Thermopylae was meant to serve as an advance guard instead of a last stand (Herodotus 7.206). Another topic worth mentioning is the Greek armor. While looking accurate at a casual glance, on closer inspection some of the Spartans are shown fighting in Roman armor (Nikoloutsos 2013, 274). I will go into the reasons behind this and how it falls in line with historical accuracy.

The section on Spartan culture discusses the Spartan form of government and its portrayal in the film. The film depicts Sparta as a prototype of the United States; Sparta is portrayed as having something akin to a democratic constitution with a king. In the film, Leonidas is portrayed as a king who can only act by the consent of his people. While this is true, the movie presents an idealized version of the Spartan constitution. The chapter will cover where the idealized views come from while discussing some aspects of Spartan society that the film glosses over.

The last section will cover Greece in the Cold War. At the beginning of the film, the Greek city-states are gathered into a meeting to discuss war against the Persian empire. This sounds like NATO vs the Soviet Union. Greece was a member of NATO and faced a civil war against a communist insurrection. The Cold War section will also discuss the film's portrayal of Queen Gorgo as the matriarch of the nation. The film shows Gorgo serving as the mistress of ceremonies in the initiation of new Spartan warriors. The portrayal of Queen Gorgo as the Mother of the Nation may be a tribute to Queen Frederica who aided the Greek army during the Greek Civil War (1946-1949), in which the Greek government fought against a Communist uprising (Nikoloutsos 2013,
This section will compare the historical portrayal of Gorgo alongside the legacy of Queen Frederica during the Greek Civil War.

Despite being presented as a sword-and-sandal film, *The 300 Spartans* is in a similar vein to *Spartacus* (1960) because it portrays a historical event. However the film is also a product of its time. This chapter will show why it is important for historians to stay involved in film and how they can use films to promote the discussion of history.

2.2.1 Greek Battle Tactics

The Battle of Thermopylae was not intended to be a last stand but was intended to serve as a holding action. Unlike its 2006 counterpart *300*, *The 300 Spartans* (1962) presents this accurately. Roughly twenty minutes into the film, King Leonidas of Sparta and Themistocles of Athens are looking over a topographical map of Greece. The scene starts with the two congratulating each other on their plan to stir up the Greek city states to fight against the Persians. Themistocles looks over a topographical map which shows the entire terrain. With a command stick, Themistocles points out that the Persian army has such overwhelming numbers that if the Greeks face them in the open, the Greeks will lose. Leonidas then points to a part of the map and asks, “What about here?” (*The 300 Spartans*, 1962). Themistocles then asks “The pass of Thermopylae?”; thus introducing us to the famous pass (*The 300 Spartans*, 1962). Leonidas confirms and adds that it is the best line of defense north of Corinth. Leonidas explains that the mountains spread across the whole of Greece and that the Persians must pass through Thermopylae because it is the only pathway through the mountains. Leonidas then exclaims, “With a small force, I can hold that narrow strip of land between the mountain and the sea until the others are ready.” Themistocles catches on and says “Then I can bring the fleet
through the narrow straights above Thermopylae protecting your flank. With your admiral’s consent of course. This is a splendid plan!” The scene shows a close up to Leonidas and Themistocles in discussion with a small shot to the map and back to them. The audience is given the impression that the site of Thermopylae will be important and that the Spartans were going to be the leaders of the coalition. The audience is correct to assume that the Spartans were the leaders of the coalition. Since Sparta’s army was the finest, and Athens navy was in its infancy, the Greeks believed that Sparta was the logical choice for leadership (Cartledge 2006, 106).

The Greeks had to pick the location of the battle carefully. The size of the Persian army in the film seems to be hundreds of thousands strong. Xerxes claims that he is leading an ocean. This exaggeration is not far from Herodotus’ historical account. In his account of the Persian war, he writes that Persia led an army that included eighteen nations in all. To the Greeks, it seemed as if the entire world was about to attack and overwhelm them. The Persian empire extended from India to Thrace and the army marching to Greece included nationalities from the entire empire. This gives the perception that the entire world was against the Greeks and the Greeks believed that this was the case.

Because of the large army marching against them, it was important for the Greeks to pick a battle site which could nullify the Persians' numbers. The scene in the film gives the impression that Thermopylae was carefully selected as the site of the battle. This is an oversimplification of the story. The Greek delegation debated for days over where to make a stand. The coalition was so disorganized that there was little hope for victory. Many of the Greeks believed that, even with all of Greece unified, they stood little
chance. The odds were so bad that a number of the Greek city-states did surrender to the Persians (Herodotus 7.132).

Those Greek city-states that agreed to fight against the Persians formed a coalition. For the coalition to succeed, they city-states needed careful planning to coordinate their efforts. However, the allies did not trust each other enough to agree on a battleplan. The two strongest, Athens and Sparta, had a history of poor relations. About ten years earlier, Athens had fought the Persians at the Battle of Marathon. During that battle, they requested Spartan support. The Spartans promised aid, but their army did not arrive until after the battle was over due to the fact they were celebrating a religious festival. The Athenians feared that the Spartans would not aid them in the present fight and be late again. The Spartans were planning to hold the entrance of southern Greece at the Isthmus of Corinth instead of defending the pass at Thermopylae, which was much farther north. The Isthmus of Corinth is a narrow strip of land between two bodies of water. It is farther south, meaning that it is much closer to Sparta, and the Spartans were confident that they could hold the Isthmus against Persia, while fighting closer to home. But if the allied Greek city-states made their stand at the Isthmus of Corinth, they would have to give up Athens to the Persians, and the Athenians were unwilling to agree to this plan.

Eventually the coalition decided to make their stand at Thermopylae, which would preserve most of the Greek city-states, including Athens. The Greeks felt that they could rely on the narrow pass of Thermopylae to ensure victory. This compromise was agreed to when the Spartans agreed to take overall command with Themistocles leading the Athenian navy as the second.
The Spartan government had a reputation of being reluctant to fight for the defense of others, but this reputation is a little unfounded. Although the Spartans were fortifying the Peloponnese and they were reluctant to leave their sphere of influence, other important factors were also at play. The Greek army was not fully mobilized and this had to do with religious festivals coming up and no one wanted to miss out on honoring the gods. Sparta, also had a religious festival and could not commit their entire army (Cartledge 2006, 126). However, Sparta had a reason to defend Thermopylae and it had to do with Mt Oeta; it was not far to the west of the pass. According to Spartan belief, Mt Oeta is where their ancestral hero Hercules was laid to rest before he became a god and ascended to Mt. Olympus (Cartledge 2006, 129). Because ancestral veneration was key to Spartan society, the council ruled that the entire Spartan army could not march until after the festival was finished. But Leonidas was given permission to lead his elite bodyguard to command the coalition defenses of Thermopylae because the situation was a crisis (Cartledge 2006, 129).

Sparta had two kings and one king usually led the army while the other usually stayed home. In this case, Leonidas decided to lead the Greek coalition. When King Leonidas went out to battle he was not a man in his prime as he is depicted in the film. In fact, he was a much older man nearing retirement age. Also he wasn’t optimistic about the chances of the Greek army. It had to do with the Delphic Oracle which foretold that a Spartan king of the line of Hercules had to die before the Persians could be defeated. The house of Agiad (to which Leonidas belonged) believed they were descended from Hercules. Because he feared the potential loss, Leonidas took only 300 of his royal guard, all of whom were men who already had children to continue the family line. If Sparta
were to lose a family line, it would be seen as a tragedy to the Spartan society. A Spartan citizen required both mother and father to be Spartan and the Spartans were a minority in their society with the rest being helots (unfree serfs) and free men who were second-class citizens. But there may also have been personal reasons why Leonidas volunteered for such a dangerous command. The historian Paul Cartledge writes in *Thermopylae: The Battle that Changed the World* that Leonidas was not the first-born son and was not originally considered to be an heir to the throne. The only reason why Leonidas became king was because his older half-brother died, so Leonidas felt like he had to prove himself. But the fact Leonidas was not the heir to the throne meant that he was eligible to go through the Spartan military training program. This may have imprinted the Spartan military code into his beliefs (Cartledge 2006, 129). The Spartan military code of honor meant that the Spartans would hold the line against any enemy and not retreat for any reason. The Spartans were joined by a force of helots along with a small coalition of soldiers from other Greek cities, making a total of about 7,000 Greek fighters. But the Persian soldiers probably numbered between 100,000 and 150,000. One of the factors which prevented the full Spartan army from mobilization also prevented the rest of the Greeks from sending their full force, namely, the onset of the Olympics (Cartledge 2006, 138). In addition to being an important sporting event held every four years, the Olympics was a religious festival in which the Greeks honored Zeus and warfare was

---

4 Helots were descendants of original inhabitants of the Peloponnese who were enslaved by ancestors of the Spartans. The other groups were called Perioikoi, or Dwellers Around. These were citizens of city-states in the Peloponnese that had been captured by the Spartans but which the Spartans did not occupy. They kept their freedom and were permitted to own their own farms or practice crafts for the benefit of the Spartans (Cartledge 2003, 72-76).
forbidden during this period. Once they arrived at Thermopylae, the small Greek force went about preparing the battle.

According to Bradford, the author of *The Battle for the West: Thermopylae 480*, the battle site was chosen well, with the sea on one side and a wall of rock on the other side. There was also an old wall that had been built long ago by the Phocians against the Thessalians. The Greeks went to work repairing the wall. This scene of preparation made its way into the film. *The 300 Spartans* does a good job of showing the Greeks repairing the old wall. The wall was important because it nullified the Persians’ numbers and offered crucial aid to the Greeks defending the pass during the battle. The Greeks had the advantage of extra time because they arrived before the Persians. Ernie Bradford writes that the Greeks made sure that all of the known passes were blocked in order to funnel the Persians through Thermopylae (Bradford 1980, 107). This was deliberate. The Persians were known for mountainous combat while the flat areas of Greece were best suited for the Greeks and their hoplite phalanx (Bradford 1980, 107).

The hoplite phalanx is a formation of heavy infantry placed in a close formation. Hoplites are heavily armored infantry, and in the phalanx, the hoplites fight in a mass formation, with several rows of soldiers fighting with interlocking shields. Unlike the Persians, Greeks traditionally fought in the hoplite phalanx, supported by skirmishers and if they were lucky, cavalry. At Thermopylae, there were no cavalry and it is here that the Greek phalanx displayed its prowess. This leads to the battle scene in the film. In *The 300 Spartans*, the Greeks are shown as fighting in a single line that was only about two men deep. Showing the Spartans are fighting in a single line is, of course, incorrect. The hoplite phalanx needs rows of spears to be used effectively (Kagan and Viggiano 2013b,
In addition, the battle is depicted as taking place in a wide field instead of a narrow pass. Although the producers took a lot of information from Herodotus, I believe the producers wanted to create a story to convey that numbers do not win battles if the cause is just. A phalanx is a mass formation in which the hoplites stand side by side in ordered ranks. Although it is unclear exactly when the hoplite phalanx was originally developed, it is clear from vase paintings that the hoplite phalanx was fully developed by 650 BC (Kagan and Viggiano 2013c, 15). The most important part of hoplite armor was the shield, or hoplos. This shield was designed to protect the wielder on the left while leaving his right vulnerable (Viggiano and van Wees, 58). If you were a hoplite in ancient Greece, the only way for you to protect your right side was to stand right next to your buddy on your right (Viggiano and van Wees, 58). This situation created the closely packed phalanx. A phalanx is vulnerable on the sides and the rear but lethal from the front. This is the reason why the numerically superior Persians could not get through the Greek defensive line for two days.

Furthermore, the Greek armor in the film is historically inaccurate. While looking accurate at a casual glance, on closer inspection some of the Spartans are shown fighting in Roman armor (Nikoloutsos 2013, 274). Nikoloutsos describes the hybrid armor in the film as follows:

The foot-long red cape that Spartan soldiers traditionally wore when they marched to war is replaced with the much shorter paludamentum worn by the commanders of the Roman army or the emperor in sculptural representations. In imperial fashion, Leonidas has his cloak draped over the shoulder and clasped with a round fibula on the left upper part of his cuirass. Beneath their thorax, Spartan hoplites wore a red sleeveless tunic that reached the middle of the thigh. Although of the same length and color, Leonidas’ tunic has short sleeves and a kilt with wide pleats, and
This Romanization of Leonidas continued in the form of footwear. Although Spartans wore armor, they often fought barefoot while the Romans wore sandals. The sandals of Leonidas resembled the sandals used by prominent figures in Roman history.  

The reason behind the blend of Greek and Roman props was to cut costs. Spyros P. Skouras, the Greek-born president of Fox (from 1942-1962) decided to produce the film in Greece. During the Cold War, the “Greek film industry was at an embryonic stage, producing only a few titles a year, and lacked the means of manufacturing the large number of period costumes required for a historical epic with thousands of extras” (Nikoloutsos 2013, 275). The film was originally planned to be produced in Italy by an Italian film company. By the time Skouras acquired the rights for The 300 Spartans, the film was already at the preproduction stage. To compensate for the inexperience, Skouras negotiated with the Italians for the purchase of all the preparatory work for the film, including the costumes. This borrowing of Roman material helped the film production more affordable. From his sources, Nikoloutsos discovered that the filmmakers did not use historical advisors and this probably also contributed to the Romanization of the costumes (Nikoloutsos 2013, 276).

How did the historical Spartans look on the battlefield? The historical Spartans dressed in standard hoplite fashion with a few differences. A standard hoplite had a large shield which protected his left side. On his head, the hoplite would wear a Corinthian

---

5 Nikoloutsos (2013, 274) notes: “Leonidas' sandals bear resemblance to those worn by heroes, deities, and men of rank and power in Roman sculpture and painting.”
helmet which restricted a hoplite’s hearing and vision (Viggiano and van Wees, 60). This situation forced the hoplite to stay close to his companions for protection. The hoplite armor had a corselet which consisted of a breastplate, and another plate for the back connected by metal bands. This was completed with arm guards, thigh guards, shin guards, and leather straps protecting the shoulders. In addition to his famous shield, the hoplite carried a spear as a primary fighting weapon and a sword that was only drawn if something happened to the spear (Cartledge 2006, 145).

The Spartans wore armor like that of the other hoplites with a few differences. The first difference was that the Spartans went barefoot. The second was a red cloak to make them stand out. The third difference was their shields. A Spartan shield had the Greek letter lambda on all their hoplites’ shield instead of personal customization like the soldiers from other city-states. The Greek lambda stood for Laconia, the area of the Peloponnese in which Sparta is situated. In addition, the Spartan shield was heavily reinforced to give the Spartans an advantage in the shoving match of the close quarter fighting of hoplite warfare. Historian Steven Pressfield describes being hit by a Spartan shield as like getting hit with a cutting board (Decisive Battles of the Ancient World, 2004). The final difference between the Spartans and other ancient Greek soldiers was that the Spartans were professional soldiers. While most hoplites were citizen militias, the Spartans trained consistently to protect their city-state from Helot rebellions. Therefore, the Spartans were regarded as the finest warriors in Greece (Cartledge 2006, 65).

2.2.2 Spartan Society
What makes Spartans stand out is that the government of Sparta had two kings, while most of the other city-states had either oligarchies or democracies. The reason behind the two kingships of Sparta came from the desire to create a balance of power (Bradford 1980, 62). The Spartans hated tyrants and this system forced the two kings to work together. We see this in the film. Early in the film, when we first see King Leonidas, he appears in his role as the Spartan ambassador to the war council in Corinth. When asked if Sparta would fight in the war, he replies: “A Spartan king cannot command his people but I know my people. They will fight.” Later we see the other king in a council meeting. The other king was named Leotychidas. This contrasts with the film 300 which shows only one king.

These Spartan kings did not have much power. Early in the film the audience sees Leonidas saying that he needs the consent of his people before he marches to war. A little later in the film, the two kings Leotychidas and Leonidas are speaking with the council about whether or not they should fight at Thermopylae, and the council is reluctant to go. The council is seen again almost thirty-five minutes into the film. This time we see two kings with the council. Leonidas tries to convince the council to allow the Spartan army to go to war but he is overruled because it is time for the Spartans to celebrate a religious festival the Carneia, during which time the Spartan army is not allowed to go to war.

To the contemporary audience, this is seen as comparing Sparta to the United States. In the United States, the president’s power is held in check by Congress according to the constitution. In fact, the kings of Sparta also had limited power and were chiefly responsible for religious functions and serving as military leaders. If one went away to war, the other stayed at home. The kings of Sparta were held in check by a council of
elders called the Gerousia. The Gerousia was an elected council of thirty elders. Despite a look of popular sovereignty, though, the government was in fact an oligarchy (Cartledge 2006, 66). The Gerousia had thirty members including the two kings and they made decisions as a group (Cartledge 2006, 57). Once a decision was made, the Gerousia would take the matter to the Assembly, a gathering of all citizens of Sparta where the vote was by voice instead of by ballot (Bradford 1980, 62).

The Spartans are depicted as lovers of freedom. The film begins in the Persian camp, and this is when we see our first Spartan, a spy who was caught sneaking into the Persian camp. Xerxes questions him and asks if the Spartans are the best warriors in Greece. The Spartan stands defiant and does not answer his question, saying only that Xerxes will find the answer soon enough. Xerxes scoffs, saying that Greece is divided with no single ruler while he is the master of the world. When Xerxes asks what hope they can have the Spartan defiantly says “That’s not for you to understand sir, for you are the master of slavery. And you know nothing of freedom!” Although this scene is fictional. It was based on an actual event between a Spartan and Persian delegation (Herodotus 7.135). Herodotus wrote that the Persian delegation asked why the Spartans were refusing the offer of friendship with Xerxes. The Spartan answered, “You know what it is like to be a slave, but you have no experience of freedom.” (Herodotus 7.135). This love of freedom might give an audience an impression the historical Spartan society was like post-WW 2 United States.

2.2.3 The Cold War
The filmmakers made a conscious decision to present the Spartans as a prototype of the citizens of the United States. Americans consider themselves to be a group of individuals who love freedom and rely on a constitution, and if the Spartans are presented in a similar way, it gives the audience a reason to root for the Spartans. This was especially important because around the 1960s, America was involved in the Cold War with a standoff against the Soviet Union. In the film, the Greek city-states were presented like NATO while the Persian empire was depicted as the Soviet Union. Early in the film, the scene of King Xerxes admiring his troops before the battle looks like the military parades performed by twentieth century dictators such as Stalin and Hitler. The producers were counting on the audience to compare Xerxes to dictators who were the rivals of the United States.

As mentioned above, although the film was produced by an American company, it was produced in Greece. Greece was committed to aiding in the project of *The 300 Spartans* and supported Hollywood in its production. The producer, Spyros P. Skouras, was born in Greece. The movie was filmed outside the village of Perachora with the full cooperation of the Greek government. The Greek government not only provided the location but the “Greek army provided numerous extras to play the roles of Spartans and Persians” (Blanshard and Shahabudin, 107). The producer was determined to latch on to this heritage of courage and bravery and advertised the 300 Spartans as a “film as a faithful, impeccably researched version of history, thereby elevating it to a realm of high art that will soon be accessible to the public.” (Nikoloutsos 2013, 273). In 1962, Greece was still recovering from the Second World War (1939-1945), and a civil war that
followed (1946-1949). To uplift the Greeks, one of their most important leaders was given homage through being identified with the Spartan Queen Gorgo.

Queen Gorgo is depicted as a woman who commands her sphere, the palace, with her agency, social action, and dignity. This is extraordinary for a woman of her time, and is based on Herodotus' account of her as an intelligent and independent woman (Herodotus 7.239). During a scene in which Gorgo gives a shield to the Spartan warrior Phyllon, she acts with the authoritative dignity of a queen. This is further shown by the wide shot which establishes the two on equal footing. Here the Spartan queen “displays an awareness of the onus that her position as a queen places upon her and acts as an initiator of young men into the symbolic order and the obligations of manhood” (Nikoloutsos 2013, 281). This depiction of Gorgo as a caring queen was an homage to Queen Frederica of Greece (r. 1947-1964), who was seen as the "mother of the nation and the army." This was a role she fashioned for herself during the Second World War (1939-1945) and the Greek Civil War (1946-1949). During these wars, Queen Frederica took it upon herself to look after the needs of the Greek soldiers and ensure that they had all the equipment they needed to fight for Greece. Frederica sewed clothes, provided supplies, and comforted the Greek soldiers. These efforts caused many Greeks to revere her as the ‘Mother of the Army.’ In a key scene in the film Queen Gorgo plays an important part in Phyllon’s induction ceremony to manhood when the Spartan warrior receives his shield from the Queen of Sparta. The audience is meant to see Gorgo as a stand-in for Queen Frederica, the ‘Mother of the Army.’ (Nikoloutsos (2013,281)). The camera begins with an establishing shot of Queen Gorgo on one end with Phyllon on the other end. She recites the law of Sparta in which she instructs a Spartan to treasure freedom above life,
to shun pleasure for virtue, endure pain, obey orders, and to fight fearlessly against the enemies of Greece until victory or death. She then gives Phyllon a shield, while saying the words “With this or on it.” This is was supposedly said by an ancient Spartan mother to her soldier son as he was going off to war (Plutarch, *Moralia* 241). This scene has several items of note. The two are shot at eye level which gives the audience the sense of the power balance. The two are equal. In addition, the set uses natural lighting with it being lighter in the center of the room. Gorgo and Phyllon are in the center of the light. This gives the audience the thought they should pay attention because this scene tells the code of the Spartans and equates them with modern Western values. To obey orders and endure pain sounds like the embodiment of a true warrior who obeys and endures hardships in battle. The producers wants the audience to believe that the mission of Sparta is to protect and cherish the free world to the death. In addition, these values encourages living a virtuous life. This is an attempt by the producers to nudge the American audience to live a virtuous Christian life and other American values. It also gives the idea that Americans are to defend the free world to the death if necessary.

The scene with Gorgo and Phyllon outlines the producers’ beliefs about the duties of the United States in the geopolitical setting of the Cold War, namely, to serve as a bastion for liberty and freedom through the NATO alliance. It also serves to pay homage to Queen Frederica. Because of her selfless actions, her maternal figure and respect that she exerts over the soldiers inspires them to honor the obligation of being loyal to the country’s ideals and defending his country to the death (Nikoloutsos 2013, 282).

The historical Queen Gorgo was mentioned a few times in Herodotus. The first time was when she reprimanded her father, King Cleomenes, and reminded him where
his duties were supposed to lie (Herodotus 5.51; Cartledge 2006, 66). Herodotus also
tells the story that the Spartans received a message was on a board covered with wax.
The Greeks usually wrote messages in the wax on such boards, but on this meseesage
board, the wax had no writing on it. Herodotus explains that Gorgo told the Spartans to
scrape the wax off the board to read the message underneath. The message explained that
the King Xerxes was preparing a mighty force to march against the Greeks (Herodotus
7.239).

This did not happen exactly this way in the film but a similar scene is shown.
About an hour and twelve minutes into the film, the scene shows Leonidas scraping wax
off a board with his sword. He mentions that his wife is a clever woman because if the
messenger was captured, the enemy would not think to look under the wax. The message
was not good. The Council of Sparta decided to fortify the isthmus of Corinth and not go
further north to defend the pass at Thermopylae. At this point in the film Leonidas
makes the decision to stay until either victory or death to honor the promise he made to
the other Greek city-states that Sparta will stay and fight in Thermopylae.

2.2.4 Conclusion

*The 300 Spartans* ends with the defeat of the 300 Spartans and their king. When
Xerxes gives them an offer to surrender, the proud Spartans refuse the offer. When the
Persian messenger says that they will all be dead, they respond: “But Greece will live”
(*The 300 Spartans* 1962). Surrounded, the Spartans are finished with arrows. The camera
is centered on the dead Leonidas with the words quoting Simonides of Ceos "Oh stranger,
tell the Spartans that we lie here obedient to their word." The narrator goes on to say that
the heroic sacrifice at Thermopylae bought the Greeks precious time and inspired them to
victory in future battles. The Persians were defeated in the following year (479 BC), first at Salamis and then at Plataea. The Greeks won the Persian War (490-479) because of the Battles of Salamis and Plataea, but without the brave actions of Leonidas and his men at Thermopylae, the Greeks would not have survived to fight any further battles at all.

One of the final scenes of the film is a shot of the stone memorial bearing the epigram of Simonides of Ceos. This gives the audience a connection to the past with this object. The filmmakers developed *the 300 Spartans* within the context of the sword-and-sandal genre. However, this chapter shows that there were many historical parallels to Herodotus’s account of the Battle of Thermopylae.

This chapter helps to answer why it is important for historians to stay involved in film and use films to promote a discussion of history. This chapter uses material from historians and the film itself to argue that the Battle of Thermopylae was not intended to be a suicide mission as popular culture presents it to be. The use of Queen Fredrica and Gorgo shows that the historical Gorgo was in fact involved and resourceful. Lastly, what is a Spartan king? A dictator or someone who answers to checks and balances? Through this chapter I used historical works to show that Sparta did have a form of checks and balances.

Of course, the filmmakers took creative liberties and deviated from the historical accounts. From the checks and balances of Sparta’s kings, they spun a tale of Sparta as a prototype of the United States. From Gorgo, the filmmakers pay tribute to traditional values and a respected American ally. From the holding action at Thermopylae which was transformed into a last stand, the filmmakers portrayed a message “throughout the
world of what a few brave men can accomplish once they refuse to submit to tyranny!”
(The 300 Spartans 1962).

2.3. 300 (2006)

When it came out in 2006, the movie 300 (2006) obtained a cult following across the United States. In classes and in the hallways, boys chanted “This is Sparta!” Michigan State University Spartans used “Spartans, what is your profession?” as a battle cry at sporting events (Charron 2009). This section will analyze this classic action film and cultural icon through the use of three topics: Spartan family life, the Iraq War, and the phrase “Remember us.”

Spartan family life was greatly embellished in this film. Leonidas is introduced wrestling with his son while his wife looks on, as if she is a mother of the 21st century. In the film Leonidas’s son will soon be sent to the agoge, a Spartan school where boys go through military training. The training in the agoge was exceptionally harsh; boys as young as seven started their training to become warriors (Cartledge 2006, 69). Many trainees did not survive (Martin 2013, 100). In short, Spartan boys after the age of seven did not have a family life and this brings an interesting question on what the film can tell us (Cartledge 2006, 72).

The film, 300 (2006), was released during the Iraq War with tensions in the Middle East reaching a boiling point. The film seemed to serve as propaganda to inspire the troops and the American public to fight against Iraq and prepare for a standoff against Iran. In this section, I will discuss the significance of this symbolism.
The final section is the command ‘Remember us.’ This is taken from the final scene of the film in which the single remaining Spartan of the 300 is given the command to tell the Greeks to remember them. After the war, the Greeks did remember the Spartans. As a historian, I wish to take this a step further and ask the question whether we still remember them today.

The conclusion will tie all this together. This is the last film taking place in the chapter covering ancient Greece. With this, I will use the film 300 (2006) are an opportunity to analyze how the Iraq War, Spartan family life, and the phrase “Remember us” are connected to history.

2.3.1 Spartan Family Life

Towards the beginning of the film, we are introduced to Spartan family life. The film depicts Leonidas laughing and wrestling with his son. Leonidas' wife, Gorgo, is looking on and smiling in a loving manner as she watches the two play, much like a standard American family in the twenty-first century. This scene looks like anything in our home around the 2000s and makes the scene recognizable to the audience.

Another noticeable scene in 300 (2006) occurs about an hour into the film. The scene shows Gorgo watching her son play with a group of other boys his age. She is talking to an old man about how it is hard for her to accept the fact her son will soon be seven years old. This means he will soon be entering the agoge. The way she says it, the audience can detect a mix of pride and worry. The older man smiles and said it was a common trial and worry for a Spartan mother.
Historically, the son of Leonidas (because he is a prince) would have been exempt from the agoge to avoid a succession crisis because the training of the agoge was so brutal that not all Spartan boys survived (Martin 2013, 100). In the film, at the beginning of 300 (2006), it shows, through a series of flashbacks, the harsh life of a Spartan child. When a child was born, it was examined by a council of elders for any defects. If there were any, the film states that the baby would be thrown into a ravine to die. When the film was first produced, this scene led some critics of the movie to critique 300 (2006) condemning the film for its depiction of the Spartans as being willing to kill a baby just because of a birth defect (Lytle 2007). But what happened historically was a similar process. The elders examined the child and, if it had defects, the baby is taken into the wilderness to die (Cartledge 2006, 206). If the baby was deemed healthy, it was raised in harsh circumstances. When a Spartan boy reached the age of seven, he would be sent through a special school called the agoge (Cartledge 2006, 69).

In the film Leonidas’s son is seven years old, and will soon be sent to the agoge, a Spartan school where the boys go through military training. The training in the agoge was exceptionally harsh; boys as young as seven would start their training to become warriors. Many trainees did not survive. The boys were expected to wear only a single tunic and sleep on the floor. They were underfed and encouraged to steal to get enough to eat. If they were caught, the boys were punished, not for the crime, but for getting caught (Bradford 1980, 61). One example came from a story which described the incident as followed “of one who had stolen a fox cub and had it hidden under his cloak, for he endured having his stomach lacerated by the beast’s claws and teeth, and died rather than be detected” (Dillon 2010, 240). This story was praised in Sparta and shows one
example of the rigors, and in our modern eyes, brutal reality of the agoge. The training of these boys would go even further when they got older. The boys were sent into the wilderness where they kill the helots. This is how the Spartans kept the helot population under control while training the next generation of warriors.

In the film, the trials of the agoge are presented as rather sad for a Spartan mother. Ironically, the historical information mentioned in the film was inaccurate in presenting Leonidas’s son as going to the agoge. Being Spartan prince, he would have been exempt from the agoge because the life was harsh, and Sparta did not want to risk a succession crisis. There were few exceptions, however. As mentioned above, Leonidas himself did go through the agoge. But Leonidas' son, because he was a prince, would have been exempt from this service. Ironically, in the filmmakers' attempt to cling to a form of historical authenticity, they presented the son of Leonidas in a historically false manner. This shows how filmmakers try to insert historical concepts in the film to make it look realistic to their audience without understanding important details or ignoring them.

2.3.2 The Iraq War

Filmmakers do not just try to make films historically authentic; they also try to make the film relatable to their audience according to modern events. Films produced in the Cold War used imagery to represent the dictators of the 20th century. The producers of 300 (2006) were no exception. For the period of the 2000s, the dominant global issue was the War on Terror and the September 11 terrorist attacks. After the 9/11 attacks, the United States became involved more proactively in the Middle East against Islamic terrorist groups. This war expanded from Afghanistan to Iraq. The film, 300 (2006), was released during the Iraq War (2003-2011) when tensions in the Middle East were
reaching a boiling point especially with Iran. The presentation of the Persians in the film was not flattering and provoked a strong reaction in Iran (Leupp 2007). A group of Iranian filmmakers condemned the film as a misinterpretation of their culture (author unknown Baztab 2007). In addition, many Iranians feared that the United States was engaged in psychological warfare against Iran (author unknown Sharif News 2007). This belief became important because an Iranian government spokesman stated that the Iranians he spoke to believed the “movie was secretly funded by the U.S. government to prepare Americans for going to war against Iran” (author unknown Sharif News 2007).

The film seemed to serve as propaganda to inspire the troops and the American public to fight. After some investigation, I found that the graphic novel that inspired the film was published in 1998. I decided to take a look at the graphic novel 300 (Miller, 1998). The graphic novel is different from the film in two respects. First of all, with the exception of a few scenes, the novel only shows the battle itself and does not show events before and after the battle. The second difference is that the graphic novel is less graphic than the film. In the graphic novel, the violence is toned down and Xerxes is portrayed as a shadowy figure.

The graphic novel’s author, Frank Miller, is a complicated man. He once admitted in an interview that his art is driven by emotions and the things that happened in his life (Thielman 2018). Miller was inspired by the film The 300 Spartans (1962). He watched this film as a boy and he was amazed the Spartans, the lost heroes of the story. He felt that this was contrary to the accepted idea of the heroes winning and saving the day. This fostered his fascination with the idea of a heroic sacrifice which affected how Miller did his art. Also, Miller designed the graphic novel as a book for for teens instead of adults.
As for Zack Snyder, the film director, he knew that much of the graphic novel was historically inaccurate. Snyder said that he did the project for fun and entertainment (Worley 2007). This information is an example of how filmmakers can take excessive liberties to create excitement for the audiences (Daly 2007). At its core 300 (2006) is invoking the idea of a fantasy film interpreting a historical event. Zack Snyder also has a history of making superhero films and regularly uses slow motion. He does this because he wants to show how messy fights can be in life (Staskiewicz 2015). Messy fights sound like an over-dramatization of a battle. But the media proves that the audience is addicted to thrills.

I have to say that I find this despicable. Throughout my historical career and research about the Classical era, I have developed a respect for and appreciation of the Persians and the outrage at the Persians being portrayed as monsters is justified.

2.3.3 "Remember us"

Yet there was another motive behind the film, which can be seen in the last scene. In the final scene, the remaining Spartan of the 300 tells the story of the brave deeds of the 300 and gives the command to tell the Greeks to remember them. After the Battle of Thermopylae, the Greeks remembered the Spartans, and this raises the question of whether we remember them. We remember the Spartans, but there is no mention in the film of the Greek soldiers from other city-states who chose to stay behind with the Spartans (Herodotus 7.222). There was no mention in the film of two of Xerxes’s brothers who died in the battle (Herodotus 7.224). I believe this scene was a plea for the
audience to remember those who perished in the War on Terror and all soldiers who died. After his presidency, George W. Bush embarked on a hobby of painting. But it was not paintings of birds or fruit, but the faces of the soldiers who perished in the conflict during his presidency.

War creates casualties. War creates change. One thing it creates is the void in which faces of individuals were lost. By 2006, casualties in the war on terror for the United States reached at least ten thousand. These soldiers became forgotten and barely a memory. That is why the film said “Remember us.”

I wish to take this a step further and take “Remember us” to the pleas of individuals through history. Now this creates a question, do we really remember them? How do we remember them? This is important because film is a construct of memory of the producer for entertainment or a political agenda.

When drawing the graphic novel 300, Frank Miller confessed:

The inaccuracies, almost all of them, are intentional. I took those chest plates and leather skirts off of them for a reason. I wanted these guys to move and I wanted 'em to look good. I knocked their helmets off a fair amount, partly so you can recognize who the characters are. Spartans, in full regalia, were almost indistinguishable except at a very close angle. Another liberty I took was, they all had plumes, but I only gave a plume to Leonidas, to make him stand out and identify him as a king. I was looking for more an evocation than a history lesson. The best result I can hope for is that if the movie excites someone, they'll go explore the histories themselves. Because the histories are endlessly fascinating (Daly 2007a).

Here Miller admits that he wanted to embellish the history for the sake of effect. He wanted evocation. He wanted to create a memory of the Spartans because he was inspired by the 1960s film about the Spartans. He admits that he tried to make the Spartans in
historical armor but he didn’t like how it made the Spartans look and did not allow them to move effectively. He drew the Spartans almost nude because that was how the Greeks were presented in pottery. This inspiration seemed as if 300 (2006) was made as a memory constructed to idealize the Spartans.

Miller claimed to follow the information he gleaned from history. When his graphic novel was under fire for homophobic actions, he wrote back:

If I allowed my characters to express only my own attitudes and beliefs, my work would be pretty darn boring. If I wrote to please grievance groups, my work would be propaganda. For the record: being a warrior class, the Spartans almost certainly did practice homosexuality. There's also evidence they tended to lie about it. It's not a big leap to postulate that they ridiculed their hedonistic Athenian rivals for something they themselves did. ‘Hypocrisy’ is, after all, a word we got from the Greeks. What's next? A letter claiming that, since the Spartans owned slaves and beat their young, I do the same? The times we live in (Miller 1998a).

Miller claimed that the story he made was a retelling of the Battle of Thermopylae from the Spartan perspective. The director of the film, Snyder, admitted that the reason why he went one step further and had Xerxes appear as an effeminate villain was to make young straight males in the audience uncomfortable. Snyder said "What's more scary to a 20-year-old boy than a giant god-king who wants to have his way with you?" (Daly 2007).

But it is difficult to believe that Snyder added this ahistorical portrayal of Xerxes' sexuality just to make young men uncomfortable. There were other reasons at work. While reading the article, I came across a reporter who mentions that Snyder was ordered by his boss to make an R-rated film (Daly 2007). This action comes from a perceived popularity of R-rated films, which is false. However this shows a perception of American culture from Hollywood's point of view which affects how history is presented.
This film also asks us to consider the concept “Remember us” from a Spartan perspective. The film 300 is presented in such a way that it looks like it is the Spartans' memory of the their stand at Thermopylae. However, the film presents the Spartans as the only ones who participated in the last stand. There is no mention of the other Greeks who stood behind with the Spartans. But there were other Greeks who stayed behind with the Spartans. There were the Thespians, Helot attendants, and the Thebans (Cartledge 2006, 147). The Thebans were either hostages or loyalists depending on the account. The Thespians and Helots were motivated by the courage of the Spartans and determined to make their stand alongside them. Although Greeks of other city-states were seen in the film, after two scenes, these Greeks vanished and the Spartans are shown fighting alone. Herodotus said we will remember them. But we have not in our current day.

The historical Xerxes had two brothers which perished in the fighting. In the 1962 film The 300 Spartans, Xerxes is portrayed as a tyrant but he mourned for his two brothers when they were killed. This happened in history and was presented in this particular film. But the Xerxes presented in 300 (2006) is portrayed as a Hindu god king with no reference to his brothers. There is no hint in the film that Xerxes even had a family or any respect for others. The filmgoers would never know that the mighty King Xerxes had two brothers which died in the fighting (Herodotus 7.225).

The lack of historical information and the cult-following which surrounded 300 (2006) is an example of why films can be influential. One film historian, Rosenstone, believes that historical films can be useful insofar as they can reconnect us with the past. But he cautions that the use of film for history is a delicate balance. Films and history have one thing in common: they both represent the experiences of human memory. Films
are the memory of the culture and the values of the people while historians are ‘remembrancers’ who record the memories of public events (Rosenstone 2006, 188).

Rosenstone’s aim is to convince historians to use historical films as a gateway to evoke a sense of importance of the past (Rosenstone 2006, 2). He believes that the past can be invoked in a meaningful way for the audience and that this is important (Rosenstone 2006, 130). This connects with 300 (2006) in regards to what Burke said when he wrote that films are the memory of the culture and the values of the people while historians are seen as ‘remembrancers’ who record the memories of public events (Burke 2011, 188). The film 300 (2006) idealizes the Spartans. This leads to my belief that 300 is presented as a memory of the Spartans.

Everything in this film idealizes the Spartans at the expense of everyone else. This was ironic because in the film, the final quote is “‘Remember us.’ As simple an order as a king can give. 'Remember why we died.' For he did not wish tribute or song. No monuments, no poems of war and valour. His wish was simple: 'Remember us,' he said to me. That was his hope. Should any free soul come across that place, in all the countless centuries yet to be, may all our voices whisper to you from the ageless stones: Go tell the Spartans, passer-by, that here, by Spartan law, we lie” (300, 2006). The last part was taken from a stone memorial bearing the epigram of Simonides of Ceos. This memorial gives the audience a connection to the past. The quote is ironic because this stand of the Spartans is used in popular culture and imagery.

After researching about the film 300 (2006), I am driven to this single conclusion. The film is designed as a memory of the Spartans. The film looks at what the Spartans
would be proud about because it glorifies their achievements while ignoring the achievements of the other city-states. The film ignores the brave stand of the Thespians and Thebans. It downplayed the Battle of Marathon, where Athens stood alone against Persia. The historian Herodotus wrote his history about this war to ensure that the great and wonderful deeds, manifested by both Greeks and barbarians would never be forgotten (Herodotus 1.1).

Yet it took a film more faithful to history to inspire a later film that became outlandish. Miller and Snyder were inspired by the 1962 film *The 300 Spartans* in which the heroes lost yet they evoked the idea of heroic sacrifice. But they took it one step further by introducing outrageous fantasy elements made for the sole purpose of entertainment. This film gives compete credit to the Spartans for their preservation of Western civilization while demonizing their opponents. This was contrary to the goals of Herodotus who wanted to give both Greeks and barbarians credit for their achievements and honor. Contrary to what the film presented, the Greeks had great respect for their Persian adversary.

In this section, I have discussed the three topics: the Iraq War, Spartan family life, and the phrase “Remember us.” As we saw in the Spartan family life section, the film makers embellished the idea of a Spartan family by making it look like a 21st century family. There was nothing like this at all. The Spartan men lived in the barracks and all Spartan boys are sent to the agoge except for the crown prince. The Iraq war section talked about the ways in which the filmmakers used modern events as inspiration. All filmmakers are products of their time and 300 is no different. The greatest irony is the phase ‘Remember us.’ The film remembered the deeds of the Spartans, but it forgot the
words of Herodotus, the other Greek city-states, and the Persians. Rather this seemed to be a way to evoke a sense to remember our American soldiers who perished in battle.

In the conclusion, the film 300 (2006) is used as a form of memory for the Spartans. 300 (2006) would stand as a film in which it displayed the Spartans how they wished to be remembered, as the greatest power of Greece. I have explained how this film confirms Rosenstone’s belief that filmmakers and historians are similar in their control over memory. 300 (2006) shows how the Spartans wanted to be remembered.

2.4 Greek Final Section: Greek Warfare and the Persians

The films Alexander the Great (1956), The 300 Spartans (1962), and 300 (2006) all have overlapping themes. This final section will be devoted to two themes that appear in all three films: Greek warfare and the Persians.

2.4.1 Greek Warfare

Greek warfare was more sophisticated than what is displayed in Alexander the Great and 300 and furthermore, Greek warfare evolved through the centuries. This section on Greek warfare will cover three topics: the development of the Greek hoplite phalanx and military practice, the Spartans, and the directors’ renditions of these in the films.

---

6 This section will discuss topics that I have not previously discussed in the thesis thus far. For more information about topics previously discussed, I will refer to the section that has more information about those topics.
2.4.1.1 The Greek Hoplite Phalanx

To begin, let me discuss the Greek phalanx, which formed the core of the classical Greek army. A hoplite is a Greek heavy infantry soldier. The hoplite soldiers fought in a close, rectangular formation, known as a phalanx. Furthermore, the Greek hoplite would fight on behalf of his polis or city-state (Kagan and Viggiano 2013d, ix). The origins of the Greek phalanx started in the Archaic Period (800-500 BC; Kagan and Viggiano 2013b, xi). Before that, during the Iron Age (1100-800 BC), also known as the Homeric era, Greek warfare was dominated by the war chariot (Kagan and Viggiano 2013b, xi). This is the type of fighting we see in the Iliad. During this period, the fighting was dominated by the aristocracy because only they could afford the horses and chariots that were necessary for this type of fighting (Kagan and Viggiano 2013b, xi). These aristocrats are the heroes of the Iliad and combat between them consisted of throwing javelins and closing in to finish off the opposing enemy with a sword (Kagan and Viggiano 2013b, xi). These warriors were equipped with javelins, an open-face helmet, a round single-grip shield, and a sword (Kagan and Viggiano 2013b, xi). Although there were infantry which would fight in a loosely organized mass, the combat is mainly decided by two heroes on opposing sides, who fight like champions (Kagan and Viggiano 2013b, xi). This combat style centered around the upper class and consolidated their control over society.

All this changed around 700 BC with the introduction of the double grip shield (Kagan and Viggiano 2013b, xi). The shield is designed to cover only he left side of the

---

7 Kagan and Viggiano 2013d, ix. Please see Section 2.1.1 for a full discussion of Greek hoplite armor.
hoplite, leaving his right side vulnerable. To compensate, the hoplite would tuck himself
behind the left side of the shield of the comrade to his right (Kagan and Viggiano 2013b, xii). In other words, if you were a hoplite in ancient Greece during the Classical period, the only way for you to protect your right was to stand right next to your buddy on your right because your buddy’s shield will cover your right (Kagan and Viggiano 2013b, xii). This situation created the closely packed phalanx. A phalanx is a forest of spears in which hoplites stood side by side in ordered ranks. Furthermore, the hoplite armor, while expensive, was much more affordable than horses, chariots, and servants needed for their upkeep (including stable-boys, groomers, and charioteers). This contributed to the evolution of the Greek city-states. Because hoplite armor was more affordable, middle-class farmers could afford to buy armor (Kagan and Viggiano 2013b, xii). As a result, the ranks of the hoplites increased and the phalanx was strengthened. The integration of the lower classes into the phalanx created a form of state unity and this meant that the lower classes were able to demand more of a say in government than they had before (Kagan and Viggiano 2013b, xii).

The tactics of the phalanx changed with the innovations of the Macedonian phalanx in around 359 BC. The Macedonian soldiers used by Alexander the Great came into being with the innovations of his father, Philip of Macedon. Philip learned about Greek military tactics during his time as a hostage in Thebes (368–365 BC). After he ascended to the throne, Philip went to work building the Macedonian army (before 353 BC). Before the rise of Macedon, the Macedonian army was a disorganized mess (Ashley 1998, 35). It fought as hoplites, but the Macedonians were undisciplined. Philip got ideas how to fix this problem, discussed in section 2.1.1 above.
When Philip’s older brother Perdiccas was killed in battle (359 BC) and the Macedonian army suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of the Illyrians who were preparing to invade Macedon along with Paeonia (Bradford 1992, 9). The dangerous situation made the Macedonians panic, but Philip did not show any fear or worry. He used his gift with words to deliver one speech after another to restore the morale of the Macedonian army. With their morale restored, he went about reforming the army (Bradford 1992, 10).  

But the Greek armies of the classical period included a diverse array of troops in addition to the hoplite phalanx, such as cavalry and skirmishers (Ashley 1998, 23). I believe this is not shown in the films The 300 Spartans and 300 for practical reasons. Cavalries are mounted soldiers and skirmishers are light infantry armed with javelins. Another one of Philip's reforms was the expanded use of cavalry. Cavalry had previously been used as scouts in the armies of the classical Greek city-states, but Philip turned cavalry into shock troops (Ashley 1998, 23). The Macedonian phalanx’s advantage of the pike’s longer reach gave Philip a decisive edge in battle against the Greek city-states and helped the Macedonians conquer the Persian empire and become a great power.

The Macedonian armor was like the Greek armor with a few differences. It was uniform in design and did not have a mix of various points of armor. Also, the hoplites in the Macedonian phalanx also had a buckler Ashley (1998, 6). A buckler is a small round shield worn over the arm.

---

8 Please see section 2.1.1 above for a discussion of how Philip reformed the Macedonian phalanx.
The battles presented in *Alexander the Great* are also inaccurate, as was discussed in section 2.1.1.

2.4.1.2 The Spartans and Their Battle Tactics

The historical armor and equipment of the Spartans was discussed in section 2.2.1. In this section I will discuss the Spartans' battle tactics. The fluid combat seen in *300* is mixed because in some ways the combat in the film resembles combat during the Bronze Age in that it was more fluid and gives more prominence to individual heroes. This style of fighting is similar to that described in the *Iliad*. However at other points in the film, the Spartans are shown as fighting in the classical hoplite manner. In the film, *300*, the fighting frequently breaks off into individual duels between the Spartans and the Persians. The reason for this is due to the fact that Zack Snyder, who directed the film, and Frank Miller, who wrote the graphic novel on which the film is based, were influenced by superhero films. Frank Miller drew the Spartans as superheroes in his comics because he drew other superhero comics. In addition to individual duels, the Spartans in *300* also use a shield wall, a wall of shields close together. The Spartans in *300* also use a number of other tactics, such as a wedge formation, and a push. The push is a standard tactic of the hoplite phalanx in which hoplites in the phalanx would work together and push on their enemy, trying to force the enemy to break their ranks. This tactic is used when the Spartans shove the Persian infantry off a cliff (*Decisive Battles of the Ancient World*, 2004)). I believe this is an exaggeration for thrills because there is no way a group of three hundred men could shove a large force off a cliff into the waters below.
Early in the film, the Spartans use something similar to a shield wall at the beginning of the battle. A shield wall protects the formation from the front. In the film, the Spartans have their shields spread apart. This is contrary to Greek military practice in which the shields were supposed to be close together for protection. In the film, the Spartans also use a wedge formation against enemy cavalry and this is incorrect because the wedge formation was used primarily by cavalry. In this tactic, the cavalry would arrange themselves in a V formation to break up infantry (Lendon (2005, 98). In addition, the first recorded use of the wedge formation did not occur until the reign of Philip of Macedon (ruled 359 BC to 336 BC) (Lendon (2005, 98).

Not only are the tactics in the 300 ahistorical, but the armor is also abysmal. In the film, the Spartans and Greeks are depicted in a loincloth, helmet, shield, and a spear. In addition, the Spartans had capes and helmets. This was not how the Spartans or any Greek soldier was armed. The Greeks did not go into battle in a loincloth, all Greek hoplites wore the set of armor mentioned previously. The reason behind this historically false look comes from the graphic novel on which the film was based. Frank Miller confesses: “The inaccuracies, almost all of them, are intentional. I took those chest plates and leather skirts off of them for a reason. I wanted these guys to move and I wanted ’em to look good.” (Daly 2007) Miller later said that he tried to draw them according to actual armor but he believed the Spartans looked like crabs and couldn’t move the way he liked.

---

9 A shield wall is a formation where soldiers form a wall of shields in the front. Either the shields are closely packed like a phalanx or spread apart like shown in the film 300. However as said before, a phalanx is a closely packed force of heavy infantrymen. And the Macedonian phalanx does not use a shield way.
The earlier rendering of the Battle of Thermopylae, as depicted in *The 300 Spartans* (1962), is much more accurate, but it is also irritating. Unlike its 2006 counterpart, the Spartans of *The 300 Spartans* (1962), do wear armor in the film, but the armor is wrong (this topic is discussed above in section 2.2.1). By the time Skouras acquired the rights for *The 300 Spartans* the film was already at the preproduction stage. Spyros Skouras was the president of Fox at the time the film was produced. Born in Greece, Skouras was the person most responsible for the film's production (Nikoloutsos 2013, 263). Because the Greek film industry was in its infancy, it was not able to create the elaborate costumes needed for this film. On the other hand, in the early 1960s, the Italian film industry was in its heyday. For this reason, Skouras negotiated with the Italians for the purchase of all the costumes. This borrowing of Roman material helped the film production become more affordable. Furthermore, most classically based films that were made in this period did not use historical advisors and this likely contributed to the Romanization of the costumes (Nikoloutsos 2013, 276).

The film, *The 300 Spartans*, shows the Spartans hard at work repairing an old wall right before the Battle of Thermopylae and this is historically accurate. According to Bradford, the author of *The Battle for the West: Thermopylae 480*, the battle site at Thermopylae was chosen because it was a narrow pass, with the sea on one side and a wall of rock on the other side. There was also an old wall that had been built long ago by the Phocians to use against the Thessalians (Bradford 1980, 107). The Spartans went to work repairing the wall when they arrived at the pass, and this preparation was depicted in the film. The wall was important because it helped prevent the Persians from using their numerical advantage. It also offered crucial aid in defending the Greeks during the
battle (Bradford 1980, 107). The Greeks had the advantage of extra time because they arrived before the Persians. Ernle Bradford explains that the Greeks made sure that all the known passes were blocked in order to funnel the Persians through the pass at Thermopylae (Bradford 1980, 107). This was deliberate because the pass, though narrow, was relatively level and so it was best suited for the Greeks and their hoplite phalanx.\textsuperscript{10}

It was here, at the Battle of Thermopylae, that the Greek phalanx displayed its prowess in fighting the Persians. However the scene in \textit{The 300 Spartans} is historically inaccurate. In the film, the Greeks are shown fighting in a single line that is only about two men deep. The way the Spartans fought in the film (in a single line) is incorrect. The hoplite phalanx needs rows of spears to be used effectively (Kagan and Viggiano 2013b, xii).

These three films indicate an important point about cultural history, namely, that the hoplite phalanx, the most important innovation of classical Greek warfare, is neglected in popular culture. The films portray the Greek soldiers by glamorizing the individual hoplites as heroes while neglecting the complex nature of the Greek military machine. Thus, important aspects of Greek warfare have been neglected and forgotten save for the pages of a history book.

\textbf{2.4.2 Persians}

\textsuperscript{10} Bradford (1980, 107). A phalanx is vulnerable on the sides and the rear but lethal from the front. This is the reason why the numerically superior Persians could not get through the pass.
The Greeks interact with the Persians in all three films. Each film presents the Persians in varying degrees of historical inaccuracy. I will go over each.

2.4.2.1 300

Of the three films, 300 depicts the Persians with the greatest historical inaccuracy. Even as a historian, where personal bias is not proper, here my personal bias and my historian side intertwine when I write this comment: the way 300 displays the Persians is terrible. It is an act of great disservice to see the Persians presented as monsters and the outrage of the Persians being portrayed as monsters is justified. In the film, the Immortals are portrayed like orcs from the Lord of the Rings and other creatures look like chaos spawn from the Warhammer fantasy. This film neglects one key fact: the Persians were men! The Greeks saw the Persians as a worthy enemy and Herodotus explains that he wants the great deeds of the Persians to be remembered in addition to those of the Greeks (Herodotus 1.1).

The Greeks certainly did not see the Persians as monsters. The historical Persians' relationship with the Greeks was complicated. During this period in classical history, the Persians were the supreme power of the world and each of the city-states interacted with the great power (Morgan 2016, 105). When the Athenian tyrant Hippias was ousted in 510 BC, he fled with his family to Persian territory (Pomeroy et al. 2018, 202).

What needs to be understood is the military ethos of the ancient world. Victory was only impressive if your opponent was impressive. The Greeks took pride in their

---

11 Warhammer fantasy is a game that takes place in a fantasy world and the prime evil faction is Chaos. Chaos is a faction which warps everything it touches, and Chaos spawn are a weird mix of various things. Several figures of the Persians in 300 look like this. A notable example is Xerxes' executioner who has an exaggerated, bloated size, hoofed feet, with hands and fingers that look like the claws of a mantis.
triumph over a powerful foe (Herodotus 1.1). Presenting Persians as beasts is not just insulting to the Persians, but to the Greeks as well. It gives the impression that these warriors fought against beasts instead of men and dampens their achievement.

Xerxes also gets the short end of the stick in the film 300. In the film he seems to be depicted as a Hindu god. The historical Xerxes would not take his representation in 300 very well. In fact, he would probably have them impaled for lying about him.\(^{12}\) Xerxes never considered himself a god because as a devoted adherent of Zoroastrianism, it would have been seen as sacrilege.

Historically the Persian kings were devoted to the god of Zoroastrianism. The religion of Zoroastrianism was founded by the prophet Zoroaster from a series of visions after he was disillusioned with the corruption among the Iranian people (Zoroaster probably lived sometime between 1500 and 500 BC). He taught this new religion for years but gained few converts (Olmstead 1948, 197). However one convert wrote down his teachings and they spread.

Cyrus, the first king of Persia (ruled c. 559-530 BC) is credited with the creation of the idea of human rights because of his belief in Zoroasterianism. The religion was revolutionary in that it promoted equality for women, among other things (Cartledge 2006, 485). Although the kings of Persia were male, records mention that the Persians allowed their women to participate openly in society (Cartledge 2006, 485). As representatives of the god of Zoroastrianism, the Achaemenid kings thought of their military conquests as a duty. When Xerxes ascended to the throne (c. 486), he was a

---

\(^{12}\) This just my opinion. According to Herodotus, Xerxes had a temper and Herodotus mentioned that the Persian Kings used impaling as a punishment for certain crimes, like lying. Herodotus 3. 159; Cartledge (2006, 48).
young man and felt like he had a lot to prove. In the Persian culture of the time, wars of conquest were expected of kings as a way to prove their valor and honor. In fact, the historical Xerxes felt a lot of pressure because his father, Darius, had taken the crown in a power struggle. Furthermore, the Persians had grievances with the Greeks on the mainland, and it was because of those grievances that they had started the Persian wars (Herodotus 7.9). In this sense, I believe the that, to the Persians, the expansion of their empire seemed normal and natural, something like the idea of American hegemony in the aftermath of the Cold War. When Xerxes ascended the throne as a young man, his original plan to avenge his father’s humiliation in a previous battle against the Greeks (the Battle of Marathon in 490 BC) was expanded to become a plan to conquer all of Greece (Cartledge 2006, 91).

2.4.2.2 The 300 Spartans

This brings us to a discussion of Xerxes’s relationship with Queen Artemisia. In the film The 300 Spartans, Xerxes and Artemisia are lovers. Artemisia makes her appearance within twenty minutes of the film. She is presented as a femme fatale who uses her sexuality to gain control over men. Dressed in sleeveless dresses, Artemisia uses the Persian King’s attraction to her to gain a seat on his war council. Throughout the film, in every scene in which she appears, she is in the company of Xerxes. The two are shown as intimate and seem to be lovers. One noticeable scene is an hour and a half into the movie. The Spartans launch a night attack to kill the king. At this point, Xerxes is in a tent with Artemisia and the two are kissing in a passionate embrace. A similar scene occurs later in the film. After several scantily clad girls perform a dance at a banquet, Artemisia and Xerxes begin to kiss one another and again fall into a passionate embrace.
In another scene, Artemisia gives advice to Xerxes and the king, being attracted to her, declares that he will give Greece to her.

This portrayal is not historically accurate. Although Xerxes and Artemisia did have a good relationship, it was not as lovers. Artemisia was the queen of Halicarnassus and was regent of her young son after the death of her husband. Halicarnassus, a Greek kingdom on the coast of Asia Minor (now Bodrum on the coast of Turkey), was controlled by Persia at the time of the Persian Wars (499-479 BC). Herodotus shows Artemisia as an independent queen who is also a loyal Persian vassal. Despite being on opposing sides Herodotus clearly has a great deal of respect for her, and presents her as a military leader of great decisiveness and intelligence (Herodotus 7.99).

When the call to arms came, Artemisia acted as any loyal vassal and joined her overlord’s campaign and was noted for her wisdom even by Herodotus (Herodotus 7.99). During this campaign, she took part as one of Xerxes’ advisors. Throughout Herodotus' Histories, she sounds like she was the sole voice of reason. Herodotus makes note of one situation in which Artemisia offered good advice. It was after the Persians took control of Athens (480 BC) and the Athenians fled to Salamis (the island next to Athens) and arrayed their fleet in the strait of Salamis (between Salamis and Athens). While the other Persian generals supported Xerxes’s plan to engage the Athenian fleet, Artemisia was the only who opposed this strategy as a poor decision (Herodotus 8.68). She said that he was foolish to be so reckless so as to allow the Greeks to decide the time and place of the engagement. Furthermore, she pointed out that Xerxes had already taken Athens, which was the objective of the campaign (Herodotus 8.68). Thus she concluded that there was no point in engaging the Greeks at Salamis. Xerxes ignored her advice because he felt
sure of a victory; after all, he had the advantage of a much larger fleet. But, in the end, the Persians suffered a terrible defeat at the Battle of Salamis (480 BC). After the disastrous battle, Artemisia was the only advisor Xerxes sought out. When he asked her for advice, she recommended that he leave Greece at once and, since he had conquered Athens, he could still claim victory (Herodotus 8.102). She also advised him to leave some land forces in Greece and to delegate authority of this army to a general. Xerxes took her advice and trusted Artemisia so much that he entrusted the safety of his family into her care (Herodotus 8.103).

As for Herodotus, I said it many times and I will say it again. Herodotus respected the Persians. He was a Greek and his viewpoint was Greek. Nonetheless he respected his Persian enemy. This had to do with the warrior cultures of antiquity, according to which a victory over an opponent was only impressive if the enemy was a great adversary. The perception of the Persian empire in Alexander the Great, 300, and The 300 Spartans is different. In Alexander the Great the Persian empire is portrayed as an old empire on the verge of collapsing and Alexander has an easy time conquering the empire by virtue of his cause. The film The 300 Spartans and surprisingly 300, present the Persians as a credible threat to the Greeks. This is historically accurate, as Persia remained a powerful force in the Aegean even after the Persian Wars.13

A notable example is the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC), which began about fifty years after the Persian war. The Peloponnesian War was fought between Athens, Sparta and their respective allies. For decades this power struggle was a stand-off because

---

13 After the Persian War, the Greeks had a question of what to do about the Persians. Athens created the Delian League to counter the Persian threat. This alliance would later develop into an Athenian Empire. (Why doesn’t Hollywood make a movie on this?)
Athens was a naval power and Sparta a land power. However, Athens built a walls around her city (making it almost impregnable) and Sparta was terrible at siege warfare. The only way Sparta could win was to build a fleet to match the Athenian one. But fleets cost money. The only nation that could afford to pay for such a fleet was Persia. Sparta went to Persia and asked for funds (Olmstead 1948, 358). The Persians agreed in exchange for a few conditions. One of those conditions was the return of all Greek colonies on Asia Minor. This gave the Spartans the funds to build the fleet with which they eventually defeated Athens (Lazenby 2004, 236).

The film 300 has been justly criticized for its racist portrayal of the Persians, but I do not think this is solely a twenty-first century idea. The Greeks saw themselves as superior to the Persians after the Greek victory in the Persian War (Morgan 2016, 125). The Greeks developed this attitude because their victory had been quite unexpected, since the Persians greatly outnumbered the Greeks on both land and sea. The Greeks wanted to understand why they had an upstart victory, and this led them to believe that the Persians were decadent and lazy (Morgan 2016, 177). This view of the Persians was discussed by Edward Said in his book Orientalism. Said also references nineteenth century scholars who described the Orient as backward and inferior to the West and described the Orientals as lethargic (Said 1979, 39). These scholars were influenced by the belief in the biological inequality of the races, which was current at the time (Said 1979, 206).

2.4.2.3  Alexander the Great
This idea of Western superiority to the East forms the backdrop of the film *Alexander the Great*. Although the film was produced during the Cold War and represents the Persian Empire as a parallel to the Soviet Union, it also implies that the world of Persia was decadent and needed a new force or idea and that renewal came through Alexander. It is a disservice to the Persians to equate the Persian Empire with the Soviet Union. If you would put a Soviet dictator and a Persian king in the same room, I believe the two would not get along. First, the Persian emperor would not like the state atheism of the Soviet Union. Secondly, the Persian kings would laugh at the low birth of the Communist dictators who ruled the Soviet Union. Thirdly, the Persian kings would be unsettled by the brutality the Soviets inflicted on their own people. The leaders of Persia had tempers, but their founder Cyrus created one of the first recorded documents of human rights to have ever existed and the Persians included that in their legal code (author unknown *BBC* 2013). This is far from the decadent savages presented in the film *Alexander the Great*.

Alexander the Great was born in 356 BC, during a period of constant turmoil among three different cultural groups that were also centers of political power: Macedonia, the Greek-speaking world, and the Persian Empire. These different groups were in a constant struggle for power. Because of its power and size, Persia was the greater threat. Its administrative ability to ensure the power of the monarchy was something coveted by Macedonian kings and the Greek aristocracy (Morgan 2016, 271).

Furthermore, Philip, Alexander’s father, interacted with the Persians on a regular basis and even considered an alliance with them (Morgan 2016, 270). He offered to marry his sons to various daughters of the Persian aristocracy (Morgan 2016, 270).
Similarly, the Macedonian women were powerful players inside the royal Macedonian court. Like their Persian counterparts, Macedonian women played an active role in politics (Morgan 2016, 272).

During Alexander's war against Persia (334-323 BC), the Persian threat should not be underestimated. Despite the generalship and battle-hardened nature of the Macedonian army, the Persians had some notable advantages. The first advantage was the great reserves of manpower. Thanks to the large size of the Persian Empire, the Persian army had a levy system for their military like the feudal system of Medieval Europe (Ashley 1998, 13). These large numbers of levies included archers, slingers, and mass infantry to supplement the cavalry and chariots. This army deployed on the open fields of the east inflicted serious damage to the Macedonian army.

The Persian fleet was also a powerful force. While the Macedonian army was practically invincible on land, their navy was weak in comparison. The Persians had a lot of ships and as long as the Persian navy fought in the seas, they could menace the Macedonian and Greek homeland. This threat was so serious, it forced Alexander to alter his plan and instead of pressing straight to the Persian capital, Alexander was forced to take every single port city to nullify the threat of the Persian navy (Ashley 1998, 206).

However, the Persians had an even greater advantage, and that was money. Alexander may have been the greatest general of his generation but if he could not pay his men, they would desert (Ashley 1998, 189). War is expensive and it requires not only troops, but also supplies and logistics. And all this costs money. When Alexander began his campaign (334 BC), he was short on funds and he was forced to disband his fleet (Ashley 1998, 206). This made the Persian navy even more of a dangerous threat.
Persian gold should not be dismissed. Since the Peloponnesian War, the squabbles of the Greek city-states were greatly influenced by the Persian gold that often flowed to one side or another. The Persians also used gold to hire Greek mercenaries, once it was discovered the Greek hoplite was a better soldier, man for man, against a Persian soldier. This caused many Greek mercenaries to sell their services to Persia and by the time of Alexander the Great, the Persian army fielded thousands of Greek mercenaries. Another use of Persian gold was its use by various Greek city-states to finance their revolts against their Macedonian overlords, who had ruled most of the Greek city-states since 338 BC (Ashley 1998, 189).

With these advantages, one could wonder how Alexander was able to conquer the greatest empire of the age. The answer had to do with leadership. The king of Persia failed to see Alexander as a credible threat until it was too late, and the Persian leadership was struck with indecisiveness and incompetence while handing the initiative to Alexander (Ashley 1998, 55). You might say Alexander did not defeat Persia. Persia, like many empires that existed before and after, defeated itself.

But the Persians were not monsters akin to orcs and demons, or members of a weak and degenerate civilization. The Persians were a proud civilization that made many contributions to the course of human history. From its founder, Cyrus the Great, we have one of our first recorded documents of human rights (author unknown BBC 2013). In my opinion, in some cases, the Persians were a greater civilization than the Greeks.

Furthermore, there was no Persian counterpart to Herodotus and there was no historian before Herodotus. Herodotus is thus the only source for early Persian history. This puts historians in an awkward position, because Herodotus cannot be checked
against other sources. Thankfully, even if his biases are known, Herodotus expressed his desire to ensure that the great deeds of the Persians would always be remembered.

In this final section on the Greeks, I have discussed Greek warfare and the Persians. I have tried to demonstrate the complexity of the warfare of the Greek world. I have also tried to show that the Persians deserve respect as one of the great civilizations of antiquity.
CHAPTER 3: ANCIENT ROME

3.1 The Last Days of Pompeii (1935)

*The Last Days of Pompeii* (1935) at the time of its creation was a revolutionary film. It was filmed by one of the five giant companies during the ‘Golden Age of Hollywood’ (1910s-1960s), RKO Radio Pictures. The film starred Preston Foster and was directed by Ernest B. Schoedsack and Merian C. Cooper. Although inspired by the novel of the same name by Edward Bulwer-Lytton, the film had virtually nothing to do with the book. The producers used special effects which were formidable for its time. The *Last Days of Pompeii* (1935) is the oldest film of my thesis. It predates the Cold War and the 21st century. While it was made during the height of the Great Depression (1929-1939), this film is useful for historians as a study of how popular history portrayed Rome in the 1930s.

This section will discuss the themes of gladiators, Roman society, and Christianity. The theme of gladiators is picked in this film because the main character, Marcus, becomes a gladiator to obtain money which offers insight into the gladiators. The section on Roman society was selected because this film portrays the clothing and buildings fairly accurately. Another theme in this section will be the idea of social mobility. Marcus starts out as a poor man and becomes a rich man towards the end of the film which American audiences would recognize as a parallel to the American Dream. Although there were individuals in Roman history who did follow this path, it was considered unusual (Burkhardt 1990, 86).

The last section will be about Christianity. When Marcus is in Judea, his son falls ill and is later healed by Jesus. Because of this experience, when the boy becomes a
young man, he is more devoted to the idea of helping others, an idea that his father, Marcus, dismisses as nonsense. When Mt Vesuvius erupts, Marcus has the opportunity to save his son and later accepts Christ as his savior. There are many things wrong with this scenario. Mt Vesuvius erupted in 79 AD (Wallace-Hadrill 2010). Christ was crucified around 33 AD (Humphreys 1992). There is a 46-year gap. I believe that this anachronism was due to two factors. First, Christianity was seen as an important part of Rome’s story. Second, this film was made at the time of the Great Depression. I believe this story of scorning the love of riches and instead loving and helping your fellow man is a critique of the love of money that started the Great Depression.

3.1.1 Gladiators

Gladiators have been a source of imagination in popular history for a long time. The famous film Gladiator (2000) was a universal success. There is an iconic line in The Gladiator (2000), in which the main character, Maximus, memorably taunts the crowd – “are you not entertained?” With this line, Maximus is mocking the crowd (and perhaps the audience of filmgoers) for their addiction to cheap thrills at others’ expense. The age-old popularity of gladiators shows that the world has always been full of powerful men, eager to cater to consumers’ desires to be entertained. In their desire for entertainment, directors frequently remove historical information and use creative liberties to cater to popular taste. How gladiators are portrayed in The Last Days of Pompeii (1935) is no exception.

Who were gladiators? The origins of gladiators started before the early days of Rome. According to some scholars, the Romans took the custom of gladitor fights from the Samnites (Mackay 2004, 134), while others claim that the Romans were introduced to
gladiators by the Etruscans (Welch 2007, 16-17). When Rome was in its infancy, the Romans found themselves in the sphere of influence of the Etruscans. The Etruscans were an advanced civilization in Italy and very influential to the Romans (Davis and Frankforter 2004). Since the Romans also took many other cultural traditions from the Etruscans, it is likely that the Romans also took gladiator fights from the Etruscans as well (Welch 2007, 16-17). But no matter where gladiator fights originated, the Romans greatly expanded the concept. The earliest historical Roman source records that the first gladiator fight took place to honor the death of loved ones during the Punic Wars (Welch 2007, 18-19). A noticeable example of an early gladiatorial contest was in Pompeii, where a nobleman held a funeral for a loved one and had several slaves fight to the death as a blood offering. This became popular with the masses (Mouritsen 2001, 97). As time went on, the Roman aristocrats used these games to gain popular support from the masses in their political endeavors (Mouritsen 2001, 97). The masses loved gladiator fights and eagerly sought more of them.

But even during the late republic and the empire, gladiators were still used for part of the funeral rites. The tomb of the son of an aristocrat had the gladiator match that took place at the funeral drawn on the wall (Ereira 2000).

Gladiator fights were not just a source of entertainment. There was a religious and cultural significance as well. The Romans saw themselves as surrounded by chaos, barbarism and disorder. The arena represented this world contained by Rome (Ereira 2000). Evidence for this view can be seen in the ways that the gladiators were armed and trained because each gladiator fought in a particular, historically accurate, fighting style. One type of gladiator called the *Retiarius* used a fighting style consisting of a trident and
a net (The Colosseum 2021). The Secutor was another fighting style that was heavily armed and trained to fight the Retarius (Ereira, 2000). Roman gladiators had many fighting styles to chose from including a two-sword fighting style and a horseback fighting style. Other fighting styles emulated the weaponry of Rome’s enemies. For example, the Hoplomachus gladiator style resembled a Greek hoplite with heavy armor, helmet, spear and sword (Kyle 1998). The Murillo gladiator was armed like that of a Roman legionary and would often fight the Hoplomachus gladiator in reenactments of battles between the Greeks and Hellenistic East. (Köhne 2000). Another well known fighting style was the Thraex, a gladiator inspired by the Thracians (Junkelmann 2000).

During the height of the Roman Empire, much of the Roman world was at peace. As a result, many Romans perceived the wars of the past as a distant memory. This caused Roman leaders to become concerned that this would breed a sense of entitlement in the populace and that the Romans would become soft and forget the military accomplishments of the past (Ereira 2000). As a result, gladiator games were presented displaying rivalries between other cultures and the Romans. Thus, the Romans saw their beliefs reinforced by these games, namely, their belief that a dangerous world was contained by the powers of Rome. However a constant exposure to the games fostered a great dependency on the games and a great enjoyment of them (Ereira 2000). As for the gladiators themselves, they were rock stars of the day. We have graffiti in Pompeii that said “All the girls love the gladiator Paris” (Decisive Battles of the Ancient World, 2004).

But most of the gladiators were slaves. The gladiators lived a life apart from society. A day in a life of a gladiator was not as glamorous as the film would imply. First, a gladiator went through hours of brutal conditioning. Once they were conditioned
properly, gladiators were taught how to fight bravely in the arena with every weapon. Surprisingly, most gladiators did not fight to the death. The fights in the arena were a show and it was expensive to replace trained fighters. Usually, a defeated gladiator was spared if he fought bravely. His courage was seen as an extension of Roman values (Ereira 2000).

The Romans can seem almost apathetic about death and this seems strange to us today. How can we explain this attitude? Half of the infants in Rome died before they were six. Roman aristocrats were expected to send their sons to fight in war. Death was so common that the Romans became used to it and as a result the Romans loved gladiator fights so much that there were drawings of gladiators on the walls of theaters (Ereira 2000). This obsession got so big that according to one source, a gladiator fight was held during a feast to entertain the guests and the fight kept going until one of the gladiators was killed (Ereira 2000). Every Roman town no matter how small had to have an arena for a gladiator fight (Ereira 2000). A Syrian king who was a vassal of Rome wanted to be seen as a Roman. In his efforts to Romanize the province, he constructed a gladiator arena and worked to get people accustomed to the arena (Ereira 2000). In fact, the only condemnation of gladiatorial contests by Roman critics was when one side did not get a fair fight (Ereira 2000).

Since gladiators were such an important part of Roman society, they figure prominently in films about Rome. And the 1935 version of The Last Days of Pompeii is no exception. In the film, which begins a few years before 79 AD, the year in which Mt. Vesuvius erupted, the main character, Marcus, becomes a gladiator to gain money to provide for himself and later his adopted son. Most gladiators were slaves so this story of
a free man as a gladiator struck me as odd. I thought that was a way for the audience to see the film as a rag to riches story like the American dream. However, on closer examination, I discovered that this detail is historically accurate. Some freemen became gladiators, but it was rare (Brown 2007).

In the film, Marcus, the main character is a blacksmith by trade. He is quite poor and after an accident in which his wife and baby son get seriously injured, he does not have enough money to pay for a doctor. At first he went to an aristocrat who had given him money on a previous occasion, but this time the aristocrat refused and told Marcus that if he wanted money he should get it in the arena. There is already something historically wrong with this. Not just anyone could be a gladiator. It required set standards and training not just in weapons but stamina and panache as well. In the film, Marcus goes to the arena, and he is examined to see how strong he is. After he passes the inspection, the overseer tells him he is strong enough and to get a shield and sword.

The next scene shifts to him in the gladiator arena where he is fighting. The fight scene is animated with a cheering crowd and after Marcus defeats his opponent, he is goaded into killing his opponent with the offer of a few gold coins. After he kills his opponent, Marcus runs back to find a doctor for his wife and son, but discovers that they did not make it. From this experience, he learns a harsh lesson that the world is a place where only those with money gain respect. He becomes angry at his poverty and becomes a professional gladiator. The scene shifts to him fighting in arena. There is a succession of snap-shots of Marcus, his opponent, the cheering crowd, and money being given to Marcus. Eventually, Marcus becomes a famous gladiator and he wins many fights and gains wreaths of honors, as well as a lot of money. After one match, he meets with
another man who tries to befriend him. This man is involved in the slave trade and he wants Marcus to work for him. Marcus refuses and remarks that he would rather be remembered as a lion rather than as a rat like the slaver who is trying to befriend him. Marcus believes he has the adoration of the crowd for his courage, and is therefore more virtuous than the slaver, who makes his living by enslaving others.

Although this is a film, it shows the gladiators as rock stars of the day. However, Marcus is a free man and not a slave. Most gladiators were slaves and had no choice. Marcus as a free man could quit if he wanted to, but he does not.

Some men who fought in the arena were criminals, and they fought animals for the amusement of the crowd. Throughout the empire, animals were taken to a zoo where they were housed until they were taken to the arena to be killed for the amusement of the crowd (Ereira 2000).

Although most gladiators were slaves, after winning several fights, these men were given a wooden sword as a symbol of honorable retirement. Even after receiving their sword, however, some would choose to go continue working as gladiators. These veterans were popular because their experience would guarantee a good show for the audience (Kyle 1998, 94).

There were some gladiators who were free men, like Marcus in the film, but they were considered to be social outcasts (Smith 1875). These few volunteers would risk losing their lives, status and reputation for honor and glory. To become a gladiator, volunteers had to go through a ritualized form of enslavement (Futrell (2006, 157). Such an act by a free man was frowned upon by the Roman society because it was seen as
disgraceful to be a slave. This was why when the emperor Commodus became a gladiator, it was seen as a scandal that the emperor of Rome would act in a manner fit for slaves (Herodian 1.15.7)

The historical emperor Commodus (177–192 AD), was a decent fighter. In the popular film Gladiator (2000), his character is presented as rigging his fights. This was a direct violation to the code of honor of the gladiators and destroyed the purpose of gladiator fights (though one could argue no one in their right mind would try to win against the emperor).

Rome was much at peace during the height of the gladiator games. Few saw action even in the military. The gladiator games were used to showcase Roman values such as bravery and courage to the masses. Values which would be forgotten in an age of peace. In an attempt to avoid being decadent, the Romans put on these games to continue the glorify Rome’s militaristic heritage (Ereira 2000).

The spectacle of the games were not as chaotic as the Hollywood films would lead us to believe. The games were more sophisticated. According to our historical sources, the arena would be filled with animals and criminals as a warmup. This would get the public excited for the skilled gladiators, who had arrived in gilded carriages the day before. The gladiators in their full armor would enter the arena and parade before the crowd. If the emperor was present they would go to him and say “Caesar, those who are about to die, we salute you! (Morton 1957, 133).” After the execution of criminals and the animal fights, then the gladiators would battle each other.
It was not until Christianity took hold that there were calls to ban gladiator games. But this was ignored until the time of the barbarian invasions. The barbarian conquerors did not support the gladiator games and the Christian writers praised these ‘noble savages’ (Ereira 2000). This idea has echoes in our culture today.

The gladiators are one aspect of The Last Days of Pompeii (1935). Another aspect is the society and architecture presented in the film. The Roman architecture depicted in the film is impressive, with the Roman columns, grand statues and marble flair.

3.1.2 Roman Society and Architecture

Historically, Roman architecture was originally rather simple, but after the Romans interacted with the Greeks, they adopted many Greek architectural conventions. Initially, this was done on an individual basis. Roman elites would adopt Greek architectural styles to appear more cultured, but as Rome became more of a world power, Greek architecture became a symbol of Roman power and modified Greek architectural ideas with their own inventions (Ulrich and Quenemoen 2013, 62).

Samples of Roman architecture still remain. However, Pompeii is special because Pompeii is a preserved Roman town. It is an archaeologist’s dream from the Roman world. Since the 1700s when it was discovered, this Roman town has continued to be excavated, and it is almost perfectly preserved. Everything from buildings to the imprints of bodies are preserved. Even today, parts of the city was still being excavated (Reuters 2020).

Because Pompeii was so well preserved, it was easier for the city to be replicated in a film. It was like stepping into a time capsule. The Last Days of Pompeii (1935)
was easy to be made because the ongoing excavations at Pompeii provided a wonderful point of reference.

So what happened on that fateful day? What happened in the year 79 AD? For starters, the eruption of Mt Vesuvius happened sometime in late summer or early autumn. According to Kirk Martini, the area suffered a deadly earthquake about 17 years earlier in the year 62 AD (Martini 1998). This earthquake caused so much damage some areas were still being repaired in 79 AD when the volcano blew (Jones 2007). It is possible, however, that the damage discovered by archaeologists could have been caused by unrecorded earthquakes, yet this only confirms that earthquakes were common around the Bay of Naples (Martini 1998). While doing some research, I learned that there had been a small earthquake at Pompeii two days before the eruption (Butterworth and Laurence 2005, 294). However, earthquakes were such a common occurrence in Pompeii that the Romans in the city did not notice (Butterworth and Laurence 2005, 293). For those tending the fields outside things were wrong. Butterworth and Laurence painted the picture of the farmers growing grapes on the slopes of Mt Vesuvius noticed their grapes were wizening and wisps of smoke rose from the ground (Butterworth and Laurence 2005, 294).

Despite these warning signs, most Romans in Pompeii were so used to the tremors they went about their business, save for a few who had a feeling something was wrong (Butterworth and Laurence 2005, 295). Butterworth and Laurence believe that these individuals left Pompeii to the scorn of their neighbors who continued their business while the clergy performed rituals to Vulcan, the Roman god of fire and fertility, to ward off the god’s hunger and anger to save the harvest (Butterworth and Laurence 2005, 295).
On that fateful day as the inhabitants began their daily business, an explosion rocked the earth, releasing a cloud of ash into the air (Butterworth and Laurence 2005, 297). This created panic and confusion but the worst was yet to come; at midday another explosion rocked the earth (Butterworth and Laurence 2005, 298). This explosion was different, it was much larger than the first with a force greater than the atomic bombs that hit Japan in World War Two ("Science: Man of Pompeii" 1956). The force was so big it blew off the top of the mountain and the mountain released ash, lava, and fire. To those present, it looked like the end of the world had come. The populace tried to reach the sea, hoping for salvation (Butterworth and Laurence 2005, 299). Some managed to survive but many did not. Most failed to outrun the hot cloud of ash and died. The city of Herculaneum, which was close to Pompeii suffered a similar fate. An investigation was made by Pliny the Elder but he died while trying to observe the volcano while his nephew Pliny the Younger fled the city with his mother (Butterworth and Laurence 2005, 308). The Last Days of Pompeii (1935) shows the destruction of Pompeii as a disaster. There is no mention of the earthquakes but the general mood before and during the earthquake is well presented. The film shows the Romans enjoying a day at the arena, then suddenly there panic erupts and everyone is desperate to escape the destruction of the city. Before the eruption life was good for Marcus.

Clothing is an important aspect of any civilization and the film did a good job of presenting Roman clothing styles accurately. It is expected by the audience that historical films will present clothing accurately (Landy 2001, 47). In popular culture, Romans are usually depicted as walking around in togas all day, but in fact, the Romans wore togas for special occasions, and this article of clothing was reserved for the
aristocracy (Vout 1996, 215). Clothing was used to show one’s status in Rome and this can be seen in the film the main character, Marcus. When we first see Marcus, he is a simple blacksmith and he wears a simple tunic. But as he advances in society, his tunics become more elaborate. He has a cloak for everyday wear and he even wears a toga few times for official business.

One aspect of the film I particularly like is how it presents social mobility in Roman society. Rome had an aristocracy and a nobility, but some social mobility did occur. And it was fun to watch Marcus advance up the social ladder while knowing this was historically accurate.

Throughout the film, Marcus runs the risk of losing his soul for money. As he succeeds as a gladiator, he gains wealth by killing others in the arena. As a result, he becomes cold and distant to others. The shots of him show him staring down on others, giving the impression of superiority especially to those who criticize him. Marcus shows scorn to a slave who criticizes the use of violence to gain money. The slave tells him that everyone is a slave and money does not matter. Marcus scorns him, calling the slave a fool. After Marcus is injured however, and can no longer compete in the arena, he turns to enslaving others to provide for his adopted son.

Marcus works for the slave trader he previously scorned and captures men in Libya to be sold as slaves. After he witnesses a man surrender after his son is threatened, Marcus decides to leave slaving and becomes a merchant. As Marcus becomes more successful, he reveals his intent to become the master of the arena. After his slave questions the morality of this position, Marcus dismisses it with “Why should it matter? Someone else would do it.” His slave reminds him: “It is your own conscience.” Marcus
disagrees and proclaims that the world only respects money. In this scene, he sits on a chair that looks like a throne, to signify his belief in power over others.

Marcus goes to Judea after a soothsayer tells him that he will meet a man who will change his life. He meets with Pilate, the governor of Judea, who tells him that the Ammonites are giving him trouble and they have many fine horses and treasure. Marcus agrees to get the horses and raids the Ammonites with the aid of an army of vicious convicts.

The next scene shows him and his army riding away laughing and driving the horses and carrying the treasure. The film implies that Marcus and his men have killed several people. Wars and raids are not simply a game. Raids are like sacking a city; people are killed, probably without any means of defense, and guards are usually also killed as well.

With his money Marcus leaves Jerusalem and returns to Pompeii. There is a time lapse in the film where we next see a shot of Marcus’s mansion. The mansion looks grand. The next scene shows Marcus as a man of wealth and splendor who has achieved his dream of becoming the master of the arena at Pompeii. He is friends with the Roman elite, and he has the wealth to make his son a Roman noble.

While the film creates this story to tell the story of the danger of wealth and uses the fictional life of Marcus to tell it, this aspect of the film does have some historical basis. Pompeii was a place of economic opportunity. I believe it has to do with Pompeii being a port city which is important for trade. Marcus’s tale of rags to riches would not have been not unheard of but it was rare and considered a sensation (Burkhardt 1990, 86).
In Rome there was a concept called *novus homo* or new man, that describes this experience.

The ‘new man’ is the first man of a family to arise to the rank of the aristocracy and high political office in ancient Rome (Burkhardt 1990, 83). The master of the arena is what one would see as a high political office. Although the film is fictional, Marcus' rags-to-riches story would have been possible, because social mobility existed even in the empire. In the film, Marcus is treated with respect by Pontius Pilate, the governor of Judea, and the new praetor of the city of Pompeii. This connects with historical accuracy, because Pompeii, being a port town, provided a greater opportunity for social mobility than many Roman cities. Also, the frequent earthquakes caused many elite families to come and go, providing more opportunities for social advancement (Cooley 2003, 21). Because of the greater social mobility at Pompeii and the earthquakes previously mentioned, the film has greater historical accuracy. On the other hand, these rags to riches men were some of Rome’s most important figures.

But the social mobility depicted in the film is also the story of the American dream and something Americans are taught in school. We were taught how America’s government gave rise to rich men like Andrew Carnegie, Henry Ford, and the Rockefellers. This resonated with American audiences because Marcus seems like a Hollywood reincarnation of the American Dream. However this success comes at the cost of Marcus almost losing his soul. Marcus' dilemma falls leads us to a discussion about Christianity.

3.1.3 Christianity
The theme of Christianity is introduced towards the middle of the film. When the main character, Marcus, is in Judea, his son falls ill and is later healed by Jesus. In gratitude, Marcus asks one of the disciples how much money he would accept. The man tells Marcus that no gold or money is necessary, because the mysterious man who healed his son is the richest man in the world. Marcus cannot believe this and later in the film he abandons Jesus when he is about to be crucified, even though he had promised to repay him.

Because Marcus' son had been cured by Jesus, when the boy becomes a young man, he is more devoted to helping others than he is to making money, an idea that his father dismisses as nonsense. Marcus tells his son that his faded memory of being healed was only a dream and that there was no such man. When the son, Flavius, grows older, he refuses to go to Rome to become an aristocrat in Rome, as his father had planned. Instead, he is secretly arranging to acquire a ship so he can help some slaves escape to freedom. These slaves were purchased to serve as gladiators in his father's arena. Flavius tells his friend and confidant, the slave Leaster, that he is planning to take slaves to an island that has no wealth, slavery, or Roman soldiers. He does not wish to tell his father because, of course, his father would stop the whole thing.

The son believes there is a meaning to life more important than making money. He has been haunted by the dream of Jesus since he was a child. He tells his girlfriend, Clodia, that he remembers the man's face as having a look of pity for the suffering world, and that because of that experience, he knows there is a world that can be brave and beautiful. He pledges to make it so and create a world of no slavery, suffering, torture or
agony. Flavius is taking a risk, not only because he is acting against his father's interests, but also because Roman law condemns to death anyone who helps slaves escape.

Toward the end of the film, Marcus has another discussion with his son Flavius during dinner. He comes in as Pontius Pilate is visiting. Pontius is still tormented by the decision to crucify Jesus despite his innocence, even though this had happened some twenty years earlier. The three men take a walk and Marcus tells Flavius that Pontius is here to take him to Rome to become a great man and a noble. Flavius rejects the idea and says: “You are making plans to make me a noble like that smiling prefect I suppose. He’s gone to torture a man to make him betray his fellows. Heartless swine.” He refuses Marcus’ command to remain silent and asks, “Shall I remain silent forever, in the face of injustice and brutality? The poor are persecuted. There must be someone to speak for them.” Marcus tells him to take the world as it is but his son refuses. Then Pontius sadly says: “My boy I heard such ideas a long time ago. They are dreams. Beautiful dreams I know. But only dreams.”

But Flavius talks about the dream he had of the mysterious man and he says: “Thou shall love thy neighbor as thyself.” Marcus tells him there is no such man. But Pilate says “Don’t lie to him Marcus. There was such a man.” When Flavius asks the fate of the mysterious man, Pilate replies that he crucified him. Then Flavius remembers and he talks to his father about the crosses on the hill. He says he now knows what he means. Marcus says “The man accomplished nothing but his own death.” Flavius disagrees and expresses his beliefs his teachings will never die.

Marcus then says “Have you ever heard what else than man said? Sell all your things and give them to the poor. Where would you be if I listened to his teachings? You
would be a laborer. Sweating all day for a few coppers as I did when I was young and foolish.” He then continues and lists all the things that Flavius has: food, slaves, a fine house, and all else money has to offer.

Flavius says he will not take part in it any longer. Declaring that he will give himself to the poor, he leaves. Pilate reassures Marcus that Flavius will calm down and eventually see reason. Throughout the scene all three men are filmed at about the same height to show all are equal in this conversation. This scene depicts the clash of ideas. The security of wealth over the ideals of Christianity.

When Mt Vesuvius erupts, Marcus saves his son and later accepts Christ as his savior. At the end of the film, Marcus is in anguish, his son is lost in the confusion of the eruption and he is in a daze. He later comes across a man who once offended him. The man is on the ground dying next to an injured boy. The man asks him to “Have mercy on my son” and dies. At first Marcus is angry. But then he remembers and says “I cried like that once. And He heard me.” Then he rescues the boy and takes him. He comes across some of his men carrying litters filled with treasure. He orders them to dump the treasure and save as many wounded as they can. He later evacuates as many as he can on his boat and discovers that, without his knowing it, he has saved his own son. As soon as he says this, he said “God of mercy. You let me save my son.” Later he buys time to allow the boat to escape but becomes mortally wounded in the process. As he lies dying, the scene lights up and heavenly music plays. Marcus says, “master so many years ago.” He holds out his hand and, in the scene, shows a faint image of Jesus receiving him.

There are several things wrong with this scenario. Mt Vesuvius erupted in 79 AD (Wallae-Hadrill 2011). Christ was crucified around 33 AD (Humphreys and Waddington...
1992). There is a 46-year gap at least and the main character and his son would be very old men if they had not died of old age at this point. First off, around the year 33 AD, Marcus looks like he was in his thirties or forties. But he would have been at least 76 years old if he had witnessed Christ's crucifixion as a young man. Even if he were still alive, Marcus would be old and not as strong as he is depicted in the film. In one of the scenes, he punches an unruly barbarian who attacked him while he was preparing for the arena. If he were in his seventies, it is very unlikely that he would be strong enough to perform this feat. Flavius was a child of around six or eight years old when he was healed by Jesus. When the final scene occurs, he appears to be in his late teens or early twenties. Historically he would be at least fifty years old when Mt Vesuvius erupted in 79 AD. Both could be alive, but both would be older men. This detail is important because the life expectancy in ancient Rome was shorter than it is today. This film took creative liberties because Christianity and the interaction with Jesus of Nazareth is important for the story.

I believe that this anachronism is due to two factors. First Christianity was seen as an important part of Rome’s story. This largely has to do with the West being predominantly Christian and the Roman Empire was the power in control of Judea during the origins of Christianity. So when Americans think of Rome, one of the first things that comes to mind is the story of the origins of Christianity. Second, this film was made at the time of the Great Depression. I believe this story of scorning the love of riches and instead loving and helping your fellow man is a critique of the love of money that started the Great Depression. This means that The Last Days of Pompeii can be seen as a cultural critique and a means of convincing the audience there were other ways to achieve
happiness, especially Christianity, besides the comforts and love of money. It was also an attempt to critique the upper class and urge them to follow the teaching of Christ as said in the Bible to give all your money to help the poor.

This section has reviewed the themes of gladiators, Roman society, and Christianity. The section of gladiators explains how the producers exaggerated and altered the historical evidence of the Roman gladiators but also included some things that were historically accurate. The discussion on Roman society tells how the producers did a marvelous job in presenting the Roman clothing and architecture, due to the findings of the archaeological marvel of Pompeii. The Christianity section explains the anachronism as a critique of the greed for money during the Great Depression and as a way to encourage the audience to serve and help their fellow men, especially the poor.

3.2 The Last Days of Pompeii (1959)

This section is on the film, The Last Days of Pompeii (1959). In this section I will investigate how the Roman government, Christianity, the Cult of Isis, and Roman relations with Egypt are presented in the film. Christianity is important in the film because the plot centers around a persecuted Christian minority who are blamed for a series of attacks on wealthy Roman estates because the bandits (who actually committed these crimes) paint crosses at the sites of their attacks. There is a historical difficulty with this plot because the film takes place in the year 79 AD, and while Christians were persecuted in the Roman empire, it was not until 250 AD that the persecution of Christians became an empire-wide policy (Cairns 1996). In addition, I do not think there
was a Christian community in Pompeii because Pompeii was an elite resort town and there is no evidence of a Christian enclave (Frayling 2012). The section on Roman government is included because one of the protagonists of the film is in some kind of a trial where there is a judge and a jury. It is presented like that of the American court. This is interesting because Rome’s system of justice is pictured as being like that of the United States, and I feel like this is worth looking into.

The section on Egypt is included because the primary villain in the film is the head of the cult of Isis who is supporting acts of banditry in order to fund an army of mercenaries with the goal of regaining Egypt’s independence from the Romans. The leader explains that this was a war to avenge the Romans’ conquest and enslavement of Egyptians. In addition, the cult of Isis did have a prominent presence in Pompeii and Isis was a highly regarded goddess in Rome. Also, the conquest of Egypt had occurred over a century earlier, and yet the villains talk as if this event was recent. This is fascinating because the movie came out during the Civil Rights Movement and this film may be an example of filmmakers blending historical and contemporary events into historical film.

As the film begins, a Roman villa is being attacked and plundered by masked men. The next scene shows the Roman governor who is terrified about the potential wrath of the emperor because of this act of banditry. The audience is then introduced to a Roman centurion named Glaucus, who is going home after a time in Palestine. Along the way, he rescues Ione, the daughter of the consul of Pompeii from a runaway chariot.

---

14 Petersen (2006). The article mentions the Temple of Isis as one of the first structures excavated in 1764.
Glaucus arrives at his father’s home and sees that his father has been killed and the house looted; he also sees a cross painted on the wall. Distraught, Glaucus swears revenge.

Meanwhile the governor, Ascanius, fears the wrath of the emperor because the government could not arrest the mass murderers. With the advice of his mistress, Julia, and the high priest of the Temple of Isis, Arbaces, Ascanius supports a festival to give the impression everything is normal. During the festival, Glaucus meets with Ione and the two fall in love while Ione’s slave Nydia introduces her friend Antonius to a secret Christian gathering. The gathering is overheard, however. This leads to the Roman soldiers arresting the Christians that night. Meanwhile, Glaucus and Ione believe that the Christians are innocent of the killings and Glaucus tries to meet with Ione’s father to persuade him to spare the Christians. Along the way, he survives an ambush from masked men and follows them to the Temple of Isis. There he sees Arbaces with the treasures. Glaucus confronts Arbaces and narrowly escapes death. However he is arrested because Julia kills the governor and frames him for it. Meanwhile Ione is arrested for converting to Christianity. Glaucus, along with the Christians, are thrown into the arena to be eaten by lions. However Glaucus kills the lion and he and the Christians are saved by some of his comrades. Then Mt Vesuvius explodes. During the chaos, Nydia is mortally wounded and dies but her friend Antonius stays with her. Ione and Glaucus escapes to the boats and sail towards the open sea.

3.2.1 Roman Government

The United States of America took much from the Romans. We took their architecture, to take just one example. The buildings of Washington D.C. are made from marble with marble columns. This architectural style serves as an example of power. The
Founding Fathers took elements of the Roman Republic as guidance for the framing of the constitution of the United States (Wood 2009, 63). American historians write books describing how the Founding Fathers used the architectural styles of classical era to help shape the ideas of the American Republic (Wood 2009, 290). This is taught in schools and has become a popular idea among the American public.

The idea of American greatness was highly pushed and supported during the Cold War (1947-1999). The film, *The Last Days of Pompeii*, was released in 1959, during the height of the Cold War. In 1959, relations between America and the Soviet Union were not the best. The Soviet dictator, Nikita Khrushchev, repeatedly threatened the United States with utter destruction (Gaddis 2005, 70). The United States was in a period of propaganda warfare with the Soviet Union and one of the trump cards the Republic had was the idea that it was a fair government as opposed to the arbitrary dictatorship of the Soviet Union.

This is important because a central scene in the film revolves around a trial. This scene takes place about in the middle of the film. The character Ione is speaking in defense of the Christians. One of the members of the court accuses her of being a Christian but is rebuked for a baseless accusation against a citizen of Rome. However, Ione confesses to being a Christian and thus she is set up for martyrdom. The Romans had an understanding of the importance of citizenship and Roman citizens had rights that non-citizens did not have.

The Roman republic (509 BC–27 BC) developed a system of laws and customs which was supposed to protect the liberty of the citizens. However, the historical Roman government was divided between patricians and plebians in a client and patron
relationship (Mackay 2004, 27). This relationship gave the patricians a monopoly on political power through dominating the plebians (Mackay 2004, 27). Among other means of control, the patricians held a monopoly on religious offices which had vast powers and influence and this irritated the plebians (Mackay 2004, 33). Over time the plebians gained more power but this occurred gradually over the course of several centuries (c. 450-287 BC). To gain these rights, the plebians initiated a series of secessions or withdrawals from Rome. During these secessions they refused to perform their ordinary labors until their demands were granted (Mackay 2004, 35). The plebians started by requesting a legislative assembly of their own with two elected officials called tribunes who had the power to veto (Mackay 2004, 36). Over time, the Plebeian Council took on a more prominent political role, and eventually it was able to pass laws which were binding on all Roman citizens (Mackay 2004, 37). By the year 343 BC Plebians were admitted to the consulship (Mackay 2004, 37). Could the Romans vote? Yes all Roman citizens had the right to vote. However originally it was divided into units, and the units were not counted equally, so the wealthier Romans had more of a say (Mackay 2004, 30). Eventually, after the Plebeian Council gained more power, the voting system was changed to a voting by tribe in an attempt to ensure that all votes were counted in an organized manner (Faulkner 2008, 33).

During most of the Roman empire (27 BC – AD 476), the emperor was a hereditary office. However, when Mt Vesuvius erupted in 79 AD, the Roman empire still followed some of the traditions of the republic. The Romans were wary of kings and tyrants and this was why Julius Caesar was assassinated on the Ides of March (March 15 44 BC). His heir Octavian learned from his adopted father and uncle. He became emperor
but he reported to the senate and assumed some important offices from the republic (Potter 2009, 173). One of the offices that Octavius was given was the position of consul. A consul was a position in the Roman republic, but even though he was the emperor, Octavius held it every year until his death (Potter 2009, 175). Octavian was also appointed governor of several provinces, and these provinces gave him power over a majority of the legions, which gave him military control of the government. (Potter 2009, 175). When Octavian (r. 27 BC-14 AD) died, his successors followed his examples to some degree.\textsuperscript{15} His successors were Tiberius (ruled AD 14-37), Caligula (ruled 37 to 41), Claudius (ruled 41 to 54) and Nero (ruled 54 – 68).

At the time when Mt. Vesuvius erupted in 79 AD, the republic had already transitioned into an empire. In 79 AD, the Julian-Claudian dynasty (27 BC- AD 68), which included Octavian and his descendants, had been replaced with a different dynasty, the Flavian dynasty (69 AD – 96 AD). This new dynasty took power after a crisis in 69 AD called the Year of the Four Emperors (Martin 1981, 104-5). The Flavian Dynasty was started by Vespasian (r. 69 to 79), who crushed the Jewish revolt with the help of his son Titus (r. 79 to 81). Titus was emperor during the time of the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius. Titus worked with the senate during his reign and was regarded as benevolent (Mackay 2004, 218). However Titus passed away after a short rule and his younger brother, Domitian (r. 81 to 96) took over (Mackay 2004, 218). For a time some of the traditions of the Roman republic remained in force, despite the fact that Rome was ruled by the emperors, for the sake of preserving order and Rome’s power in the

\textsuperscript{15} As emperor, Octavian took on the official name of Augustus.
Mediterranean. (Waters 1963). But this ended under Domitian (r. 81 to 96) who showed no subtlety and revealed his autocratic nature (Jones 1992, 161).

Americans tend to believe that a republic is the best form of government, and this was especially true in the 1950s, when this film was produced. But despite the Americans' predominant view that their republic is one of the finest governments on the planet, we still have our fair share of problems. The producers of The Last Days of Pompeii were aware of this and wanted to make Rome in this film seem relatable to the audience. So they presented the Roman government as a prototype of the republic of the United States. And like the United States, the Roman government had its fair share of problems. One such problem presented in The Last Days of Pompeii was decadence. This decadence was shown prominently in one of the characters, Julia, who led the cult of Isis in Pompeii.

3.2.2 The Cult of Isis

Within the film, the cult of Isis is prominently displayed. This is historically accurate because the Cult of Isis did have a prominent presence in Pompeii and Isis was a highly regarded goddess in Rome.16 When the excavation of Pompeii was started, the Temple of Isis was one of the first buildings excavated. In the film, the Julia, the high priestess of the cult, is the mistress of Ione’s father, the governor. Julia uses her influence on him to ensure that the cult remains influential in the political life of Pompeii.

---

16 Petersen (2006). The book mentions the Temple of Isis as one of the first structures excavated in 1764.
In this task, Julia is aided by her superior, Arbaces, the high priest of Isis, and his force of outlaws who are conducting acts of banditry in order to fund an army of mercenaries with the goal of regaining Egypt’s independence from the Romans. The bandits, under the command of the priest, are stealing from rich villas around Pompeii and blaming it on the Christians. Arbaces explains that the purpose of the war is to avenge the Romans’ conquest and enslavement of the Egyptians. In one scene, Julia expresses remorse over killing the governor because she loved him. Arbaces accuses her of forgetting what the Romans did to their race. Julia denies that she has forgotten. Then Arbaces declares that after they avenge the desctruction of their race, he will hire an army of mercenaries to reclaim Egypt and she will become the new queen.

This scene is anachronistic, since the conquest of Egypt occurred the year 30 BC, and yet and these characters talk as if this event was recent. This is impossible because the action of the film takes place within a few days and the year would be 79 AD. This would mean they were talking about an event that happened a century ago as if they lived during that time. The conquest of Egypt (30 BC) ended in a defeat for Antony and Cleopatra (Roller 2010, 150-51). In the film, Julia explains how the Romans came and destroyed her family and that as a result she has developed a hatred for the Romans.

It is likely that the Temple of Isis is depicted in The Last Days of Pompeii as a place of debauchery because of Christian perceptions of the Egyptians. In the same year (1959), the film The Ten Commandments came out, and the Egyptians are portrayed as behaving promiscuously in that film as well. I believe this situation comes from the Judeo-Christian culture, especially in the United States. The Bible portrays the Egyptians as evil and idolatrous. The story of Joseph escaping from Podifer’s wife who tried to
seduce him, the story of Moses, and Solomon’s Egyptian wife introducing him to idols are examples of such biased views. In *The Last Days of Pompeii*, the film portrays the adherents of Isis as engaging in all sorts of debauchery.

The cult of Isis started in Egypt and was created as a mix of Greek and Eastern religions and may have started as early as the second century BCE (Veymiers 2020, 132). Historians disagree as to whether the prominence of the cult of Isis among the Romans was the result of the Roman policy of assimilating other religions or whether it arose as a challenge to traditional Roman religious ethos (Butterworth and Laurence 2005, 53). The Romans were obsessed with the Orient. Roman women would buy luxury goods from the East and Roman men were also willing to pay high prices for these luxury goods (Butterworth and Laurence 2005, 54). This caused outrage among Roman moralists who they were disgusted with how the hard-won wealth of Rome was being pocketed by merchants from the Orient. They believed that such wealth was strengthening Rome’s Eastern enemies while weakening the Roman empire (Butterworth and Laurence 2005, 54). In AD 19 Emperor Tiberius demolished a temple of Isis in anger over a priest of Isis committing a sexual misdemeanor (Butterworth and Laurence 2005, 53). Nonetheless, Romans had a fascination for Eastern religion and believed that the Egyptian religion had great wisdom because it was unimaginably old (Lynch 2010, 30). Because the cult of Isis was so popular among the Romans, the Cult of Isis played a prominent role in Roman life and it was also important in Pompeii. At first I believed that the reason why the Cult of Isis was so prominent had to do with sexual rituals of the Cult of Isis, since Pompeii was noted for having many pleasure houses. I believed there was a link between the two because Isis was the Egyptian goddess of motherhood.
However with closer research I discovered this was not the case. According to Joseph H Lynch, the Cult of Isis was dignified and moral (Lynch 2010, 31). This is in contrast to the view of Butterworth and Laurence, who write that the Cult of Isis was involved in a sex scandal (Butterworth and Laurence 2005, 53). However other historians agree with Lynch and claim the Cult of Isis supported moral purity (Bøgh 2015).

It is my opinion, films of the Cold War period displayed polytheistic religions with a hint of debauchery in order to further their narrative. Another example is how the Israelites worshiped the Golden Calf in The Ten Commandments (1956). Although it’s tempting to blame all this on Christian values, as a historian I must mention that the ancient Romans also presented the Egyptians in a similar light. When Octavian was at war with Cleopatra (32–30 BC), he presented her as a harlot to the people of Rome thus ensuring their support in his conquest of Egypt (Roller 2010, 7).

3.2.3 Christianity

Like its 1935 counterpart, the 1959 edition of the Last Days of Pompeii includes Christianity in the story. However, unlike Marcus and Flavius, the main characters of the 1935 film, Glaucus and Ione are not depicted as being alive at the time of Christ’s crucifixion. This makes the 1959 version a bit more plausible, but not very much. Nevertheless, this is what makes the film exciting for me to talk about as a historian. The Christians in this film are presented as a persecuted minority. This is an accepted trope because the Christian persecutions of ancient Rome were well recorded thanks to Christian writers such as Tertullian who wrote: “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of
the church” (Bainton 1960, 26). I was surprised when I learned this information and if I, as a historian am surprised, then this information is probably not public knowledge.

In the film, Christians are a persecuted minority in the town of Pompeii. The first scene of the film depicts a Roman villa in flames with masked men running around sacking the estate and killing the inhabitants. After killing all the people, the bandits paint crosses all over the house in order to frame the Christians for their deeds. The authorities of Pompeii thus blame the Christians for these attacks on wealthy citizens and anti-Christian sentiments rise.

The historical record of Rome includes a similar event. During the rule of emperor Nero (54-68), Rome was plagued by a huge fire. The story goes that Nero played a lyre while the city burned, but the factuality of this story is questionable and only highlights that Nero was an unpopular emperor. Nero was considered unpopular for many reasons. For many Romans, his actions were considered egregious (Barrett 2010). Furthermore, the contemporary Roman historian Tacitus wrote that the Romans thought Nero blamed the Christians by personal cruelty (Champlin 2003, 121). Many Romans were also outraged when Nero killed his own mother, Agrippina, in the year 59 AD (Potter 2009, 21). Because he was unpopular, when Rome burned in the year 64 AD, Nero needed a scapegoat and he picked the Christians in order to divert the blame to someone else (Champlin 2003, 121). According to Champlin, Nero had Christians put to death by "being thrown to the beasts, crucified, and being burned alive" (Champlin 2003, 121-22). This was the first widespread persecution under the authorization of the Roman government (Lynch 2010, 83).
The relationship between the Roman state and the early Christians was complicated and a little strained. Many festivals in Rome had a religious significance, and all citizens were expected to participate. But the early Christians firmly held to the belief of worshiping one god and never worshiping idols. Their refusal to take part in public festivals made the Christians seem to be enemies of the social order in which religious ritual played a vital part. Whenever a Christian was arrested it was under the charge of atheism because Christians did not have idols or temples to their god (Bainton 1960, 29). Another aspect of Christianity that baffled the Roman elites was the fact that the Christians revered a man who had been crucified like a common criminal. However Christian apologists fought back with counterarguments of their own (Bainton 1960, 30). One counterargument was comparing the Christians to the Greek philosopher Socrates (Bainton 1960, 29). Despite these problems, however, the persecution of Christians was mainly a local and sporadic affair. Because it was not systematic or widespread, Christianity was able to grow at a rapid rate.

There is a female protagonist in the film named Ione who is sympathetic to the Christians. Her slave and best friend, Nydia, is a Christian and her example inspires Ione to become a better person. Later when Ione is on trial, she speaks in defense of the Christians and confesses that she converted. Because she is now a Christian, Ione is arrested alongside the rest of the Christians. The Christians are treated terribly, trapped in a large cage. In one scene the leaders are whipped. Yet towards the end of the film, the Christians are depicted praying and singing. This scene depicts the culture of martyrdom in early Christianity. The Christians know they are going to die but they would rather die than renounce their beliefs. In the film, the Christians are thrown to the lions but Glaucus
saves them and kills the lion. When the volcano erupts, some of the Christians, including Glaucus and Ione, escape destruction. This is the final scene. It gives a message to the audience that while the pagan Romans gave us a legacy of good government, their decadence caused the Roman empire to fall. However, there is good news! Christianity will carry the torch of the Roman legacy for future generations.

This might be a plausible explanation used by producers to justify their creative liberty of allowing Christians into Pompeii. The destruction of an idolatrous world and the arrival of the virtuous Christians might fit into the mindset of America in the 1950s, since the Soviet Union was known for its state atheism and the majority of Americans were Christian. I believe that the producers of *The Last Days of Pompeii* may have wanted to present Pompeii as an allegory for the destruction of the sinful Soviet Union and the preservation of the pious, religious United States of America.

Historically there were no Christians in Pompeii. Pompeii was an elite resort town and there is no evidence of a Christian enclave (Frayling 2012, 93). Pompeii had the strategic position of a trading hub between Rome and Egypt and this was one reason why the Cult of Isis was prominent in the town. Also, the policy of Rome absorbing other religions was common. However due to its status as a resort town for the elite and tendency of the elite to worship the Roman gods, there is no historical evidence of Christians in Pompeii (Frayling 2012, 93). As a historian, I believe this holds some degree of historical accuracy because in other areas where Christians existed, there were written records of encounters with Christians. One example is that of Pliny the Younger, who will be discussed later in this section. However other historians believe that there were Christians in Pompeii and they have written essays on the topic. I stumbled upon
one such essay during my research which uses pictures of Christian crosses found on the ruins of Pompeii as proof. However on further research, I learned that Christians were reluctant to use crosses during the first century because it reminded them of a gruesome execution (McGrath 2006, 321-23).

The Roman state policy persecution of Christians did not start until Diocletian. There was no Roman law during this period (79AD) that outlawed Christianity (Lynch 2010, 79). Instead, the persecution of Christians was sporadic and came from local magistrates who were angered by Christians for their refusal to take part in the worship of the Roman gods (Lynch 2010, 79).

However, the history of Christianity in the Roman empire was not what many Christians would expect. Through watching the film, a member of the audience would suspect that Christians had been persecuted since their religion first existed. This was not true historically. During the reign of Tiberius (AD 14-37), the Romans saw the Christians as a curiosity but never paid them any heed. If there were disputes, they happened locally but for the most part the Romans left the Christians alone. The primary reason for this benign neglect was the belief that Christianity was a form of Judaism, which was a protected religion in the Roman empire. However, when Roman authorities discovered that Christianity was a separate religion, the problems increased (Lynch 2010, 83).

17 Personally I found this essay questionable because there was no name for the author, date, or publishing info. However the author had a bibliography that used Berry, Paul. The Christian Inscription at Pompeii. Lewiston, N.Y.; The Edwin Mellen Press, 1995.

18 The Romans did not practice religious freedom like that in the U.S. constitution. Rather they had a policy of religious tolerance to preserve order within the ir vast, multi-cultural empire. If a religious sect fostered seditious ideas, however, those sects were struck down ruthlessly.
The next major recorded instance of the persecution of Christians was during the reign of Emperor Trajan (r. 98 to 117). He was in correspondence with Pliny the Younger. The considerable time difference between these two incidents reveals the fact that the persecution of Christians was a local affair instead of an empire-wide policy (Middleton 2020, 5). The interaction between Pliny the Younger and Emperor Trajan offers helpful insights on how the Roman state handled the ‘Christian menace.’ The correspondence is a discussion about policy. During this discussion, Pliny, the governor of Bithynia-Pontus (110 AD), explains that he felt so overwhelmed by cases of Christians that he stopped hunting for Christians and is now following a policy of leaving the Christians alone, but punishing them if a Christian were brought to him by a reliable individual (Lynch 2010, 84). Trajan supports his position (Lynch 2010, 84). This correspondence between Trajan and Pliny the Younger reveals the historically probable policy of Rome’s interaction with Christians. Roman authorities would not seek after Christians and often dismissed unconfirmed and anonymous cases, but if a Christian were to be brought forward by a respected individual with evidence, then the Christian would be punished (Lynch 2010, 84).

Looking back at The Last Days of Pompeii with this information offers new insights. Although there is no historical evidence of Christians in Pompeii, the actions taken and the situation is historically plausible because it is similar to the policy in other Roman towns during this period. The portrayal of Christians serving as a target of the Romans' prejudice and as a scapegoat for other crimes is historically plausible and Nero’

---

19 Pliny the Younger was the nephew of Pliny the Elder who perished when Mt Vesuvius blew, the same eruption which destroyed Pompeii.
actions after the Great Fire of Rome (AD 64) is one example. The Roman authorities of Pompeii in the film are in the same situation as their historical counterparts. In the film there is the perception that the Christians have been living here for some time in secret. However, the Christians are scapegoated for crimes committed by the priest of Isis and his followers. Ione, the mistress of the governor of Pompeii, is also a priestess of Isis and she sees the Christians both as rivals and as an opportunity. One of the reasons the Romans had a problem with Christianity is that Christianity was not tied to a particular place or ethnic group, but was inclusive and spread across the Roman empire at a rapid pace (Bainton 1960, 23). Also Christians had a tendency to challenge the various other temples because of their belief in only one god (Lynch 2010, 81). This angered the religious officials of various temples. A similar situation can be seen in the film, since the priest and priestess of Isis use the Christians as a scapegoat to further their own plans because the Christians were generally unpopular.

The scene where Nydia invites Antonius to attend a secret meeting to see how good Christians really are shows the prejudice an average Roman might have had towards a Christian. For many Romans, the Christian ideas of repentance after conversion is a ludicrous idea. One Roman elite wrote that the idea that a robber could convert to Christianity and become instantly reformed was ridiculous (Bainton 1960, 28). In addition to charges of atheism for refusing to worship the emperor and the polytheistic gods, Christians were despised for their secret meetings. Many Romans believed that Christians engaged in incest and ate babies (Lynch 2010, 82). These ideas made it hard for Christians and it did not help their case when Christians became more aggressive in proselytizing their religion at the expense of the traditional Roman gods. Towards the end
of the film, Ione converts to Christianity and she and the other Christians refuse to renounce their beliefs. This causes them to be thrown into the arena. Although many Christians did cave in to Roman pressure to return to polytheism, many others stood by their beliefs. While the film portrays the culture of martyrdom, it does not show the historical fact that some early Christians asked for martyrdom, especially when they followed a charismatic leader (Freeman 2009, 207). Some historians believe this had to do with Christians seeing Socrates and Cato as martyrs and this inspired the Christians to be more willing to accept martyrdom (Freeman 2009, 206). In the film, the scene of the arena depicts only one lion. This may have been a huge letdown for the audience, who may well have expected more lions. This expectation may come from people's ideas about the Emperor Nero who is believed to have thrown Christians to the lions. At the least, historical data records show that the mob chanted, “Throw them to the lions!” (Lynch 2010, 81).

In the end, *The Last Days of Pompeii* presents the persecution of Christians during the pre-Diocletian era with some historical accuracy. The issue of Christianity was a local problem depending on the Roman elites of each particular city. If there were no particular problems, Christians lived in relative peace despite the tensions. If something happened, however, the Christians were often used as scapegoats and persecutions did flare up for a time.

But this period of relative peace came to an end with the rise of emperor Diocletian (r. 284 to 305) who started the first empire-wide policy of persecuting

---

20 I could find no reason who the producers used only one lion. Especially with the information mentioned above. The only reason I could think of is budget constraints.
Christians. Some Roman leaders like Diocletian and Galerius blamed the Christians for defying the Roman gods and sought a return of the golden age through the destruction of Christianity. But by the rule of Diocletian, Christians were so entrenched in Roman society that it was impossible to remove them. Christians and pagans intermarried, and the pagans found it distasteful when the authorities killed and imprisoned their friends and family (Lynch 2010, 124). When it reached this point, it was only a matter of time before Christianity was given legal status within the Roman Empire. This finally occurred with the reign of Constantine (r. 306 to 337).

The heroic, triumphant ending of The Last Days of Pompeii (1959) shows the Christians escaping the destruction of Pompeii, leaving the pagan world behind. This is misleading. The ending of the film is really only the beginning of the struggles of Christians. For several years the position of the Christians remained unsteady and individual Christians were at the mercy of the local Roman government and the population. After that, during Diocletian's reign, came a wave of great persecutions where the Christians went through tortures and executions which were even worse than the lions. It was many years before Constantine arrived and gave the Christians protected status in the Roman empire.

In this section on The Last Days of Pompeii (1959), I have shown how the Roman government, the Cult of Isis, and Christianity are presented in the film. The Roman government is presented as a predecessor to the United States. This is incorporated by the producers to give the Americans a degree of familiarity with the society in the film. The Roman republic had some governmental institutions that were similar to those of the United States. Both republics had voting, trials, and the elected
officials. When Rome became an empire, the Roman emperors for a time maintained the façade of the Roman republic in order to legitimize their rule. The cult of Isis did exist in Pompeii, and their temple is one of the first buildings excavated. The topic of Christianity in the film is more complex. Although there is no evidence of Christians in Pompeii, the film accurately portrays how the issue of Christianity was handled in various provinces around the Roman Empire. The film also accurately portrays the tensions between the two groups.

3.3 The Eagle (2011)

*The Eagle* (2011) is a film that revolves around the disappearance of the Ninth Legion of the Roman army. The full name of the Ninth Legion was the *Legio IX Hispana* (Campbell 2018, 38). This section will discuss three topics: the disappearance of the Ninth Legion, the Roman military machine, and mystery cults. The disappearance of the Ninth Legion is in my opinion, one of the greatest mysteries of the ancient world. *The Eagle*, along with an earlier film called *The Last Legion* (2007) attempts to explain the disappearance of the Ninth Legion, which disappeared from the historical record after 120 AD (Campbell 2018, 49). The question of how the filmmakers used historical information as well as legends to further the plot of their story is certainly an interesting one. It is also significant because the mystery has never been solved.

The section on the Roman military machine will draw on the documentary, called the *Perils of Empire* (2013). This documentary argues that nations in the ancient world ran the risk of collapsing the more they invested in a military machine, and as a result
overextended their resources (*Perils of Empire*, 2013). Although the documentary generalized this, the historians in the documentary use the Roman Empire as the focus. *The Eagle* takes place in Britain during the 2nd century AD, which is depicted in the film as a period of decline in the Roman Empire. Because of this decline, the local garrison is undermanned, and the troops are exhausted. I will investigate whether this portrayal is based on accurate historical information.

The last section about mystery cults is inspired by the main character, Marcus Flavius Aquila, who is shown praying to the god Mithras. This is interesting because the god Mithras was widely worshiped throughout the Roman Imperial Army, and Mithraism is considered by some to have influenced the development of Christianity (Soudavar, 2014). Through these three topics, *The Eagle* will be analyzed as a historical film within the context of Roman history.

The Roman Empire has captured the imagination of audiences for generations. One of the first historical films of the twentieth century was the film *Cabiria* (1914) directed by Giovanni Pastrone. The film was about the Roman victory over Carthage in 201 BC and was made only a few years after Italy’s conquest of Libya in 1911-1912 (Schenk 2017, 38). The film historian Georges Sadoul credits the Italian conquest of Libya as the inspiration for the film which (in his view) presents ancient Rome’s destiny and heritage as that of modern Italy (Schenk 2017, 38). This introduced ancient Rome as a setting for films, a trend that continued through the 1950s and 1960s all the way to the 2000s. Yet most of these films show only one side of Rome’s story, in which its military is on the rise and Rome is at the height of its power. This makes *The Eagle* unique in
terms of the narrative and presentation of Rome in historical films. *The Eagle* takes place at the start of the decline of the Roman Empire.

The story of the film centers around the character Marcus and it takes place in northern Britain in 149 AD. Marcus enlists in the Roman legion to regain his family’s honor after the destruction of the Ninth Legion, of which his father served as the commander. Marcus becomes seriously wounded after his first battle against a large force of Britons. Due to his tactical skill and courage, he leads the Roman garrison to victory but one of his legs is broken during the battle and he receives an honorable discharge. Marcus is distraught and lives with his uncle until he recovers and decides on a future course. During this time Marcus is depressed and he feels that life has no meaning. He is also upset because of his father’s disgrace over losing the Eagle of the Ninth Legion. After watching a gladiator fight, he obtains a slave who is the son of a chief of a British tribe. Marcus hears rumors that the eagle of the Ninth Legion was sighted in northern Britain beyond Hadrian’s Wall. Hadrian’s Wall was built by Emperor Hadrian (ruled 117 to 138) to separate the Romans from the barbarians and symbolized the extent of Roman control in Britain (Lobell 2017). If Marcus goes beyond Hadrian’s Wall, he will be on his own, out of the protection of the Roman army. Marcus does go beyond Hadrian’s Wall, leaving the safety of Roman Britain with his slave to recover the eagle. He hopes

---

21 Britons are the Celtic group of people who inhabited the British Isles before and during the period of Roman conquest and rule of southern Britain.

22 The Roman Eagle was a military insignia fixed to the top of a spear or poll and used by Roman legions. A Roman eagle served as a rallying point for the Roman legions and had a quasi-religious significance to the Roman armies. The Roman eagle or aquila resembled a perched eagle with outstretched wings. The eagles were usually made from silver or bronze.
that the recovery of the eagle will restore his family’s good name after his father’s defeat. After a tumultuous journey, in which Marcus battles the elements, gets into heated discussions with a Roman deserter and his slave over the honor of Rome, and endures captivity at the hands of the Seal People, he finally obtains the eagle. Marcus and his slave escape and join the Roman deserters to defeat the Seal People and defend the eagle when the Seal People attempt to retrieve the eagle after Marcus recovers it. At the end of the film, Marcus and his slave return the eagle to the governor of Roman Britain. Now that the eagle has been returned, the honor of Marcus' family is restored.

3.3.1 The Roman Military Machine

The Roman Legion was a remarkable war machine. A legion consisted of 5,500 legionaries (Elliot 2017, 21). The legions were divided into centuries and maniples which allowed great flexibility and permitted the Roman officers to make tactical decisions in the heat of battle (Decisive Battles of the Ancient World, 2004). Each soldier was dressed in a uniform suit of armor and helmet. The Roman helmet was different from the Greek hoplite helmet because the Roman helmet had a wide face and cheek plates. The Roman soldier also wore a breastplate of metal rings with greaves protecting the legs. Each Roman legionary carried a tower shield and each soldier carried two weapons; a gladius, which was a double-edged thrusting sword, and a pila, which was a throwing spear that would penetrate the opponent’s shield and even the opponent himself (Hughes 2011, 41). The pila was made from an ash shaft with an iron shank which had a barbed point (Hughes 2011, 39). Later variations would have the function of having the iron head.

---

23 The Seal People are a fictional British tribe invented for the purpose of the story.
break off from the wooden shaft, which made the opponent’s shield useless (Poyyrt 2009, 135). Another advantage of the bending of the Roman pila on contact ensured that the spear would not be thrown back at the Romans by their enemies. At the height of Rome’s empire during the Principate (27 BC to AD 284), the Roman army consisted of twenty-five legions (Collins 2015, 8).

Each Roman Legion carried a standard, usually a Roman eagle. The Roman eagle, as mentioned above, was a military ensign fixed to a pole that served as the standard for each Roman legions. These were important to the legions not just because they were symbols of Rome, they had a quasi-religious significance. Whenever an eagle was lost or taken by the enemy, it was considered the highest form of dishonor. For this reason, Roman legionaries would fight to the death to protect the eagle standard and go to great lengths to recover them (Seager 2005, 74).

The beginning of *The Eagle* gives the audience a perception of an empire in decline when Marcus assumes command over a Roman fort made of wood that has only a small garrison. Later, the audience discovers that Marcus asked to be sent to Britain because of the events surrounding his father. The background music gives a sense of gloom as you look over the wooden fort. The audience will expect this is a sense of decline. However, the use of wood to build a fort was not a sign of deterioration, because, since the time of Augustus, Romans did use wood to build their forts (Collins 2015, 38). At dinner several junior officers express concern because the disappearance of the Ninth Legion is still fresh in their minds. Because of the Ninth Legion's disappearance, the

24 A military ensign is a symbol meant to show nationality. The Roman aquila was a standard in the shape of an eagle and one belonged to every legion.
Roman garrison is stretched thin. The fact that the Roman garrison is in dire straits is also clear from the fact that the area around Hadrian's Wall is garrisoned with only a handful of Roman soldiers. The film, *The Eagle*, portrays a Roman army that is weakened by over-extension, and to that extent, it is historically accurate. Another historically accurate detail is the building of the Roman fort. Popular history gives the perception that Roman forts were made from stone. However, during this period, the Roman army built forts in strategic and troublesome areas from any resources that were available to the Romans (Collins 2015, 58). This was used to secure as many areas as possible in addition to limiting the size of the local garrison. While the forts could hold off moderate attacks and allowed the Romans to put down minor insurrections and border raids, the shortage of manpower made it hard for Roman soldiers to settle serious internal problems within the areas the Romans were governing (Collins 2015, 48).

This fort in *The Eagle* is the setting for two combat scenes that display the prowess of the Roman military machine, one during the night and the second one during the following day. Fighting during this period was extremely brutal and the film does not hide it. Fighting was mainly hand-to-hand combat, and the soldiers used whatever weapons they had. If a fort or fortified town was taken by the Romans, the inhabitants were at the mercy of their attackers. Conversely, if the Romans were defeated by the native population, they were shown even less mercy. The day after he arrives at the fort, Marcus leads the Romans into battle against the Britons. In this scene, the film shows the effectiveness of the Roman legion against larger numbers. The discipline, training, and superior equipment of the Roman legions was, to a large extent, responsible for creating the Roman empire. In the open fields the Roman legions were unstoppable. In the film,
the Romans begin their combat with the pila throw in which the Roman legionaries throw javelins. Then the legions attack with the gladius, a short sword designed for thrusting and slashing. Although they were outnumbered, Marcus’s men still managed to win this battle. Although the fight scene was fun to watch I was bothered as a historian by how the Roman testudo was presented. The testudo formation was presented as an infantry breaker in the film. A testudo was a Roman military formation that had the Roman legionaries interlock their shields to provide full cover for all sides, including above (Elliott 2017, 24). This formation was effective for protection against arrows and used by Roman legionnaires during sieges while using siege equipment (Levithan 2013, 62). Testudos were also used for assaults and when the Roman legionaries dug at the walls to make them collapse, but they were not used to attack an infantry formation (Levithan 2013, 163).

The Roman military machine had its origins in the citizen army of the Roman republic (509 BC–27 BC). This citizen army was organized into legions. This is the fighting machine that conquered Italy in a series of wars and later the Mediterranean. The two factors that gave the military machine of Rome their power and prestige were their great reserves of manpower and their determination. When the Romans suffered their greatest defeat at the hands of Hannibal Barca (Battle of Cannae, 216 BC), they rejected any diplomatic actions to exchange their prisoners or talk of peace; instead, they rebuilt their army (Mackay 2004, 69). Even though Rome lost against better commanders, they were able to wear down their opponents through superior numbers and the versatility of the Roman legions. An important part of the Roman army’s flexibility was its use of maniples. These were small groups of soldiers that could fight independently or together
as a unit. When a traditional phalanx (i.e., troops massed in a rectangular formation) is compared to a phalanx composed of maniples, an army formed of maniples can quickly make adjustments on the field of battle, while a traditional phalanx cannot be adjusted.\textsuperscript{25} And this is the key to Roman military success, they were flexible! They were also willing to learn military tactics from their enemies. During the First Punic war (264–241 BC), the Romans lacked a navy, but that did not stop them; they built a navy to defeat the Carthaginians, which was a sea-based power (Potter 2009, 64). The Romans were willing to try diverse tactics until they found a tactic that worked. This was the fighting machine which transformed Rome from a city-state in Italy into the masters of the Mediterranean Sea.

However, like all military machines, when they became overextended, the Roman military machine eventually became weaker. Towards the second century, the Roman Empire met its match in the form of the Parthian empire. The standoff between the two would test the resources of the Roman empire to its limit (Faulkner 2008, 221). And this is seen in the film, which is set during the reign of Emperor Antoninus Pius (138-161). Historically, however, the weakening of the Roman army did not begin under the reign of emperor Antoninus.

While the weakening of the Roman army intensified during the reign of emperor Antoninus Pius, it began during the reigns of his two predecessors, the emperors Hadrian (r. 117 to 138) and Trajan (r. 98-117). The Ninth Legion disappeared during Hadrian's
reign (120 AD), but there were already signs of weakening of the empire during the time of Trajan.

The overextension of the Roman army began during the reign of emperor Trajan (98 to 117). The Romans got involved in two major wars almost simultaneously. One war was with the Dacians to secure additional territory for the Roman empire. Emperor Trajan thought that the yearly tribute to the Dacians was disgraceful, so he sought to remedy the situation through military conquest. His campaign into Dacia (across the Danube, in modern Romania) was intended to settle the problem of paying tribute and to prevent the rise of a strong kingdom on the border of the empire (Freemen 1996, 417). Trajan’s other war was against the Parthians, to the east. This war started when a succession dispute arose in Armenia (Mackay 2004, 227). The reason why the war started was because the Parthians were backing one candidate for the Armenian throne (Mackay 2004, 227). Not willing to see another rival to Rome get stronger, Trajan decided to annex Armenia (Mackay 2004, 227). This war saw the overextension of the empire despite some initial victories (Mackay 2004, 227).

*The Eagle* begins in the year 149 AD, during the reign of Antoninus Pius (138 to 161). Except for an expedition to southern Scotland, there were no major wars or conflicts during Pius’ reign, and as a result, his reign is considered peaceful (Potter 2009, 225). The foray into Scotland was more of an attempt to gain prestige early in his reign (Breeze 2013, 53). I believe this had to do with internal politics because Antoninus’s predecessor Hadrian was not popular among the military elites (Mackay 2004, 229).

For the Romans at the time of Antoninus Pius, protecting the borders of the empire was an important duty (Faulkner 2008, 228). Little is known about Antoninus
Pius’ expedition to southern Scotland, but he is likely to have launched it early in his reign, to prove he was a good Roman emperor and to acquire additional territory (Salway 1993, 146). The Roman army was successful in its conquest of additional territory, and Antoninus Pius was able to erect a new wall (the Antonine Wall), about 100 miles north of Hadrian's Wall, which had been built some 20 years earlier. Construction of the Antonine Wall began in 142, and was completed by 154, but the Roman occupation of northern Britain was short-lived. By the late 150s AD the Antonine Wall was abandoned, and the Roman army retreated back to Hadrian's Wall (Salway 1993, 148). The reasons for the Roman retreat are not clear, but it is likely that the Roman army was overextended, and was unable to adequately defend the northern border against determined Celtic tribes, who were waiting for a right moment to attack.

I must emphasize that the Roman soldiers in *The Eagle* acted in a historically plausible way during the scene (mentioned above) when they were discussing the loss of the Ninth Legion. The loss of an entire Roman legion, along with its eagle standard, was a military disaster. Now, the Ninth Legion was not the first Roman legion to be destroyed. Rome had a history of military disasters. The worst military disaster in Roman history was the Battle of Cannae (2 August 216 BC) during the Second Punic War in which the Romans faced the Carthaginian general Hannibal Barca, one of the greatest general of the age (Peddie 1997, 6). The Romans came against Hannibal's army with eight legions, while Hannibal’s army was only half this size if not smaller (Polybius, *Historiae* 3.107). Hannibal was able to overcome the numerically superior Roman army fighting on an open field with the use of a double envelopment tactic (Hoyos 2015, 122). In this formation, Hannibal placed his Gallic forces in the center with the center curved
out towards the Roman lines. Hannibal had his African forces on the edges with his Numidian cavalry and allied Spanish cavalry on the flanks. The Roman infantry charged towards the center, but Hannibal used his African infantry to circle around and attack the Romans from behind. With the aid of the cavalry, Hannibal surrounded the Roman army and destroyed it (Hoyos 2015, 123).

Another military disaster was the Battle of Carrhae (53 BC). This battle was fought by the Roman general Marcus Crassus in a failed attempt to conquer the Parthians. In this battle, seven Roman legions were destroyed by the Parthians with the use of horse archers and cataphracts. Furthermore the Romans lost all seven of their eagle standards (Decisive Battles of the Ancient World, 2004). Another military disaster was the battle of Teutoburg Forest (September, 9 AD) In this battle, the Romans were destroyed by a confederation of Germanic tribes. The legions that were destroyed were the 17th, 18th, and 19th. This battle terrified the Romans for many reasons. The first reason was the destruction of three legions which left the Roman Empire vulnerable for invasion. The second reason was the loss of three eagles (Decisive Battles of the Ancient World, 2004). These legions were the personal favorite of emperor Augustus. The

---

26 Potter (2009,73). Dexter Hoyos states that Hannibal used Italian calvary. This is strange because other historians I read such as David Potter, John Peddie, Jacob Abbot, and the history documentary Decisive Battles of the Ancient World all say that Hannibal used Spanish cavalry.

27 The Parthians used horse archers and cataphracts in battle. Horse archers were archers on horseback who were trained to shoot arrows, not only while riding towards the enemy but also while riding away from them. This was an extremely effective tactic. The cataphracts were the precursors of the Medieval knights. These heavily armored cavalry were deadly in a full-on charge. After horse archers exhausted the enemies with constant arrow volleys, the cataphracts would charge.
Roman legions were destroyed, and the people of Rome feared a barbarian attack. This traumatized Augustus to the point where he urged a policy of never going beyond the Rhine and urged his successors to do the same (Mackay 2004, 191).

After each of these defeats, Rome responded with a vengeance. The Romans sent an expedition to bury the dead and recover the lost eagle standards of the 17th, 18th, and 19th. Julius Caesar planned an invasion of Parthia to avenge the defeat of 53 BC, but his assassination prevented it (Osgood 2006, 47). During his reign, Augustus (r. 27 BC to 14 AD) received the eagles and prisoners from the Parthians (Cassius Dio 1987, 54.8.162). And after the disastrous Battle of Cannae, the Romans were eventually able to win the Second Punic War (in 201 BC). But what is strange is that the Romans did not attempt to win back their lost honor of the Ninth Legion in 120 AD. I believe the reason had to do with the political and military reality; Rome felt like it could not afford to.

The grim start of *The Eagle* might give the audience the impression they are seeing the Roman Empire in its last days. However the second century was historically a period of stability and prosperity (Faulkner 2008, 228). It is referred to as the era of the good emperors (AD 96 to 192). However, Rome experienced a shift in policy during the reign of Emperor Hadrian (r. 117 to 138) (Faulkner 2008, 222). Hadrian favored a defensive policy instead of the aggressive, expanding policy of previous emperors (Faulkner 2008, 222). This had detrimental effects on the morale of the Roman army (Freeman 1996, 419). I believe this happened because Rome’s resources were overextended. In the documentary called the *Perils of Empire* (2013), the historian Bettany Hughes uses a metaphor to describe ancient empires as organisms that live for conquest, relying on loot and expansion as a form of oxygen (*Perils of Empire, 2013*). If
they do not continue to acquire loot and land, ancient empires would wither and die. The documentary centers around the disaster of Teutoburg Forest (9 AD, discussed above) which depleted 10 percent of the military at the time (*Perils of Empire*, 2013). The documentary stresses the importance of military expansion, but at the same time it shows the problems that ensue if the empire is spread out too thin. And these effects were still being felt in the period depicted in *The Eagle* (120 AD). Because of the defeat in the Teutoburg Forest in 9 AD, Augustus ordered his successors to not push the empire beyond the Rhine. However, the militaristic culture of Rome remained. As a result, Rome fell into the problem outlined in the documentary, *Perils of Empire* (2013). The documentary argues that empires in the ancient world ran the risk of collapsing the more they invested in a military machine, and as a result overextending their resources (Mackay 2004, 191).

One thing this film fails to portray is the military ethos of Rome. Halfway into the film, Marcus and his slave meet a deserter from the Ninth Legion named Lucius. Lucius escaped from the battle where Marcus’s father had been killed and joined with the Selgovae tribe who took him in. In a later scene Lucius says to Marcus: “I don’t know what your father’s orders were, but we had it coming. Why did they have to come north? There is nothing here worth taking. Couldn’t they have been satisfied with what they had? They always have to push and push on for more conquests, more territories, more wars.” What Lucius says to Marcus was not in line with the Roman military ethos

---

28 I am aware I said the time of the Five Emperors was a golden age, but I will be explaining this point later in the section.
historically. Historically Rome was a militaristic culture and most Romans during this period were in favor of Roman expansionism. In the classical era, there was a sense that empires survived by conquering smaller civilizations, which generally did not survive after they were conquered (Faulkner 2008, 224). Earlier I mentioned that the Roman soldiers were not too happy with Emperor Hadrian’s change in military policy of permanent defense (Freeman 1996, 419).

The point of view expressed by Lucius in the film seems to be a contemporary view of America’s involvement in the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars. By 2011 there was an increasing sentiment among the American public in favor of getting out of the Iraq war. This political stance is further highlighted in the film because the Romans are deliberately portrayed by American actors (Rose 2011).

As I write this, America has ended its twenty-year war in Afghanistan, letting the Taliban take over. Some Americans fear that the twenty-year long occupation of Afghanistan is the only thing that has kept large-scale terror attacks from reaching our shores. Furthermore, China has gotten bolder and doubts that the United States would defend Taiwan (Gan 2021). Americans today understand what it feels like to be citizens of a global power that has overextended its power. To the average American, just as it was for the average Roman so many years ago, life appears to go on as normal, but there is a shifting of power on the edges of empire, and that has an effect. *The Eagle* captures that feeling of a great empire in decline.

3.3.2 The Ninth Legion
The Ninth Legion is at the center of one of the greatest mysteries in history. The scholar Duncan B. Campbell in his book, *The Fate of the Ninth*, describes the story of the Ninth Legion through Roman inscriptions, using epigraphy (Campbell 2018, 1). Although this thesis will not cover the use of epigraphy in detail, a brief explanation is needed. Epigraphy is the study of text inscribed on various objects including stone. Romans loved inscribing deeds on stone and many monuments or memorials have inscriptions of a legion's great deeds or an aristocrat’s promising career. Using texts and monuments, Campbell attempts to solve the mystery of the fate of the Ninth Legion and explains his own beliefs as to which theory is more historically correct.

The Ninth Legion’s origins are disputed. There was a Ninth Legion during the period of the Republic that fought in the Social Wars and served Caesar during his time as governor of Gaul (Keppie 1984, 56). The Ninth Legion came into its own during the reign of Augustus (r. 27 BC - AD 14) when they assisted him in subjugating a revolt in the Roman province of Hispania (modern Spain). This is where the legion got its name (*Legio IX Hispana*) (Campbell 2018, 37-38). After this, the Ninth Legion was transferred to Germany and later participated in the invasion of Britain (Campbell 2018, 40). In Britain the Ninth Legion fought against the revolt of Boudicca (revolt was 60-61 AD). The Ninth Legion suffered a defeat but survived and later participated in the suppression of the revolt.

After this event, the history of the Ninth Legion becomes difficult for historians to trace. Sections of the Ninth Legion were deployed to Roman Germania during the year AD 68. But by the year 120 AD the Ninth Legion seems to have disappeared because the evidence of its existence simply vanishes. Several theories have emerged as to the
reasons for the disappearance of the Ninth Legion. Some believe the Ninth Legion was destroyed in Britain, while others say it happened during emperor Marcus Aurelius' Parthian War (161–166). This theory is problematic, however, because there is no evidence that the Ninth Legion was ever deployed to the East. Others believe that it perished in the Jewish Revolt (132–136 AD). The loss of the Ninth Legion is unique in history because the loss of a Roman legion is no small feat.

The most popular theory is that the Ninth Legion was destroyed while trying to quell a British uprising against Rome. For many historians, this is the most plausible scenario based on the evidence (Russell 2011). However, some historians disagree because there is some evidence that some members of the Ninth Legion were in the Roman province of Germania Inferior (modern Nijmegen in the Netherlands) according to evidence of certain tegulae, or roof tiles.30 These tiles came from Nijmegen and they appear to date from a period after AD 120. This led to the belief that the Ninth Legion was later deployed to Germania. However historians still have difficulty finding a definite date for the tiles (Campbell 2018, 123). Because of the inability of dating the tiles, many historians still believe that the Ninth Legion never left Britain except for a temporary posting in Germania Inferior (Campbell 2018, 133).

But what happened to it? First let's consider what facts are known about the mystery. As discussed by Duncan Campbell in his book, The Fate Of The Ninth, the

---

30 Campbell (2018, 122). When the Roman legions constructed buildings on their forts, they frequently had the terra cotta tegulae (roof tiles) stamped with the number of their legion. Many of these roof tiles are found during the excavation of these army forts, and they help to identify which legions were stationed at any particular fort and when; Warry (2006, 138).
mystery started with a roof tile found in York in the early 1700s with the name of the Ninth Legion inscribed on it (Campbell 2018, 30). This tile was not used as historical evidence until a few years later, in *Eboracum* (1736), a book about the history of York written by the English antiquarian and surgeon, Francis Drake (1696-1771), to support the theory that the Ninth Legion was stationed in Britain (Campbell 2018, 34).

More than 100 years later, in 1854, a young German historian named Wilhelm Pfitzner published a history on the legions of Hadrian (r. 117 to 138) (Campbell 2018, 36). He was interested in several Roman inscriptions that listed the various Roman legions. According to Campbell, the timing was perfect because another historian named Karl Ludwig Grotefend had just published his important study of the Roman legions (Campbell 2018, 37). Grotefend believed that the Ninth Legion continued into the reign of Emperor Hadrian (Campbell 2018, 46). Grotefend mentioned a letter from Fronto to Marcus Aurelius, his tutor and lifelong confidant. In this letter, Fronto mentioned that, under the emperor Hadrian, the Romans had suffered a terrible defeat in Britain (Campbell 2018, 46). Thus, Grotefend concluded that the Ninth Legion was destroyed in Britain because of this defeat. Campbell writes that Grotefend's theory was widely accepted because Pfitzner's book tells about a pillar listing the names of the legions under Hadrian.\(^{31}\) Pfitzner noticed that the Ninth Legion, along with a few others, were missing from the list (Campbell 2018, 49). This is important because the only other time when this is known to have happened is when the 17\(^{\text{th}}\), 18\(^{\text{th}}\) and 19th legion suffered the disaster at Teutoburg Forest (9 AD) (Watson 1969, 121). Since these three legions

\(^{31}\) Campbell (2018, 46-47). This inscription had been published as early as 1588, and the pillar is now in the Galleria Lapidaria in the Vatican.
are known to have been taken off the list of Roman legions as a result of being destroyed, and since we have evidence that the Ninth Legion was stationed in Britain and that it was later taken off the list, it makes sense that the Ninth Legion was destroyed in Britain.

The belief the Ninth Legion perished in Britain was supported by the 19th century Italian count and antiquarian, Bartolomeo Borghesi. In his 1838 book, Borghesi noted that during the time of Hadrian, the Britons were prone to uprisings, and that Ptolemy’s *Geography* records that there were three legions stationed in Britain during the reign of Emperor Hadrian, namely the Second Augusta, Sixth Victrix and the Twentieth Valeria Victrix (Campbell 2018, 54). Borghesi theorized that the Romans suffered a disaster that led to the end of the Ninth Legion, and that Hadrian was forced to replace the Ninth Legion with the Sixth Victrix (Campbell 2018, 54). This theory was supported by the German scholar, Emil Hübner who published a book in 1873 surmising that the Ninth Legion was not transferred out of Britain but was destroyed in a revolt by the Britons (Campbell 2018, 80).

All of this evidence was used by the famous German scholar of Roman history, Theodor Mommsen. According to Campbell, in his 1885 book, *Die Provinzen von Caesar bis Diocletian* (*The Provinces from Caesar to Diocletian*), Mommsen boldly claimed that the Ninth Legion, which was stationed in Eburacum (York, UK) suffered a devastating defeat and the culprits were the Brigantes, a British tribe (Campbell 2018, 83). This theory was hailed by Mommsen's contemporaries, but Campbell notes that Mommsen did not have strong evidence that the Brigantes were responsible for the

---

32 Mommsen received the Nobel Prize in Literature for 1902 for his three-volume work, *Römische Geschichte* (1854-1856).
humiliating defeat which led to the end of the Ninth Legion. Campbell notes that ever since the Roman conquest, the Brigantes were docile and peaceful (Campbell 2018, 84). However, Mommsen argues that Hadrian’s Wall was not only designed to protect against an attack from the north, but also an attack from the south. Mommsen argued that this was proof the Romans were concerned with barbarian uprisings south of Hadrian’s Wall, which is where the Brigantes' territory was (Campbell 2018, 85). Campbell expresses his disappointment that Mommsen did not elaborate more on this theory.

Another find came in the town of Silchester on October 1866 (Campbell 2018, 93). A man doing some excavations found a Roman eagle hidden in a wood. No one knows how it got there and a tale was spun that the last Roman legionary did his best to hide the legionary eagle, to prevent it from falling into the hands of the victorious Britons. This inspired the novelist Rosemary Sutcliff to write *The Eagle of The Ninth* (1954) to bring the mystery of the eagle and the Ninth Legion together (Campbell 2018, 98). The film *The Eagle* was based on this novel. This is significant because it shows how historical mysteries are used in popular stories for the purpose of excitement, money, or to arouse the interest of history buffs. However, in 1950, the curator of Colchester Museum examined the eagle and determined that it came from a forum or basilica and not from a military standard (Campbell 2018, 98). Although the Silchester eagle provides an amazing tale, it apparently had nothing to do with the Ninth Legion. But that still leaves the mystery of the Ninth Legion unsolved.

The theory that the Ninth Legion perished in Britain remained dominant for two generations since Mommsen (Campbell 2018, 101). Historians found no fault in Theodor Mommsen’s logic and came to the same conclusion that the Ninth Legion perished in
Britain in 120 AD (Campbell 2018, 83) under the emperor Hadrian (ruled 117 to 138) (Campbell 2018, 102). According to Campbell, prior to 1960, no one considered that the Ninth Legion might have been destroyed outside of Britain. However a new theory of the destruction of the Ninth Legion started in 1967 by Sheppard Frere, in his book *Britannia: A History of Roman Britain*. Frere argued that the Ninth Legion was temporarily stationed in Noviodunum (Romania) (Campbell 2018, 121). Frere based his theory on the discovery of two roof tiles in Noviodunum that have the inscription LEG VIII written on them (Campbell 2018, 122). A historian named Eric Birley suggested in his 1971 article “The Fate of the Ninth Legion” that the Ninth Legion was transferred to the east and that this was the legion destroyed by the Parthians in Hadrian’s Parthian War (161–166) (Campbell 2018, 134). In 1981, the historian, Peter Salway, wrote that the Ninth Legion was stationed in Germania (because of the Nijmegen roof tiles) and later may have been sent to the east where it may have perished in the Jewish revolt of the 130s (Campbell 2018, 138). Salway continues to promote this theory in his more recent publications (Campbell 2018, 138: Salway 1993, 127).

In addition to the tiles mentioned previously, Campbell tells of a tombstone of a Roman officer who was Tribune of the Ninth Legion named Quintus Camurius Numisius Junior. According to Campbell, in the 1980s, the historian Werner Eck noted that Quintus‘ tombstone suggests that he was tribune of the Ninth Legion in 140 or 141 AD, and later served as commander if the Sixth Victrix Legion (Campbell 2018, 136). However his dates of service in the Ninth Legion are disputed by scholars (Campbell 2018, 136). With this new information, Campbell concludes that the Ninth Legion did not perish in Britain during Hadrian's reign (Campbell 2018, 139). He is optimistic that
further archaeological evidence will finally provide a definitive answer to the disappearance of the Ninth Legion. At the end of his book, Campbell laments that, despite recent archeological evidence, many still believe that the Ninth Legion disappeared in Britain. According to Campbell, the motivation for this belief is probably that it makes a good story (Campbell 2018, 140).

Even though Campbell has rejected this theory, I personally think the Ninth Legion did perish in Britain. The evidence that the Ninth Legion was transferred out of Britain relies on the tombstones of officers and the tiles found in Nijmegen. I believe this is a problem because officers may be transferred out of a legion, while the legion itself remains in place. Quintus Camurius Numisius Iunior may be an example of just such a transfer. After he served with the Ninth Legion, he was transferred to the Sixth Victrix Legion (Campbell 2018, 135). The Sixth Legion may have been sent to Britain after the Ninth Legion was destroyed (Nitze 1941). The tiles from Nijmegen are an interesting find, but there has been no investigation about the dating of these tiles (Campbell 2018, 125). Until a time when the tiles are definitively dated, it is possible that the Ninth Legion built this building before they were transferred to Britain. So the fact that Numisius remained in Britain after Hadrian's reign does not prove that the Ninth Legion was not destroyed there.

As a historian, I do not just take physical evidence of buildings or tombstones into account, I also take primary sources into account. One primary source is the letter between emperor Marcus Aurelius (161 to 180) and his confidant and former tutor, Fronto. Fronto was an important person because he was a lifelong friend and tutor to Marcus Aurelius. Thanks to this close relationship, the two kept in correspondence with
one another, which is why we have the letter today. The letter said that the Ninth Legion suffered a catastrophic defeat in Roman Britain from a British uprising under emperor Hadrian (117 to 138). Marcus Aurelius (r. 161 to 180) was the son of a nephew to emperor Hadrian (117 to 138). When Hadrian died, Antoninus Pius became the next emperor and he adopted Marcus Aurelius as his heir. Marcus Aurelius is considered to be the final member of the Five Good Emperors (AD 96 to 180). To me this primary source carries more weight because we have a contemporary account of the event. With this piece of evidence, Grotefend came to the conclusion that “the Romans suffered a significant defeat under Hadrian in Britain, and it is more than likely that only then did the IX Hispana succumb.”

Campbell's book, *The Fate of The Ninth*, mentions that the emperor Hadrian was concerned about trouble in Britain and this trouble contributed to the near destruction of the Ninth Legion (Campbell 2018, 115). If I were to guess, I would say the Brigantes had a hand in the defeat of the Ninth Legion. During the reign of emperor Antoninus Pius (138–161), they attacked an ally of Rome unprovoked (Pausanias 8.43.4). This appears to be far from a peaceful British tribe. Furthermore, Campbell mentions that Grotefend noted the Ninth Legion was stricken from a pillar that had the names of all Hadrian’s legions (Campbell 2018, 49). It is these two pieces of historical evidence, the pillar of the Legions of Hadrian and the letter between Fronto and Marcus Aurelius that lead me to the conclusion that the Ninth Legion met its end in Britain. I am aware that Campbell disagrees with this theory and believes the Ninth Legion transferred out of Britain to Germany. However, since the tiles found in Nijmegen

\[33\] Campbell (2018, 46) This quote came from Campbell’s book *The Fate of the Ninth* in which he quoted Fronto’s *On the Parthian War.*
are not fully dated, it is possible that the Ninth Legion was in Germany before they were transferred to Britain (Campbell 2018, 125).

The survival of Quintus Camurius Numisius Iunior can also be explained. As noted above, the Romans' defeat in Briton mentioned in the letter between Marcus Aurelius (161 to 180) and Fronto explains why the Ninth Legion was not mentioned on the pillar of Hadrian’s Legions. However there were survivors of the defeat, but the Romans did not have enough numbers to rebuild the legion. I believe the remnants of the Ninth Legion were transferred to Sixth Victrix Legion. This explains how Quintus Camurius Numisius Iunior, an officer of the Ninth Legion became part of the Sixth Victrix Legion. In the end, the destruction of the Ninth Legion was not a struggle where the Romans were cut down to the last man. Instead they suffered a humiliating defeat which forced the Ninth Legion to disband. The Ninth Legion fizzled away, and the survivors joined the Sixth Victrix Legion when it arrived in Britain to replace the Ninth Legion.

However, the disappearance of the Ninth Legion is still a mystery. There is not enough evidence to provide a definite answer, which means that historians must keep searching. We know the Ninth Legion served in Britain. But around the year 120, during the reign of emperor Hadrian (117 to 138), it just disappeared; the entire legion was gone. This is the most interesting part of the story of the Ninth Legion. Unlike the defeats at the Teutoburg Forest, Carrhae, or Cannae, there were no attempts to avenge Rome’s honor. In those previous battles, Rome was able to eventually conquer the enemy or to launch a punitive expedition to avenge lost Roman pride. In other words, the Ninth Legion’s
disappearance was a sign that the system was starting to fall apart and Rome’s era as an empire was reaching its end. I believe this is the reason that Hollywood picked this story.

3.3.3 Mithraism and Mystery Cults

This section on Mithraism is inspired by one scene of this film. Early in the film, Marcus is unpacking his gear and lights a candle. Then he prays to Mithras, lord of light: “Father of our fathers. Help me lead my men well. Do not let me dishonor my legion.” While he says this, he moves his hands about, pushing smoke around him in a ritualistic manner. Then he holds up a necklace with an eagle carving, and while holding the eagle, he prays: “Please help me regain my family’s honor.” Then he kisses the eagle.

Although there were other mystery cults, this thesis will look at Mithraism especially because of its connection to the main character. This is interesting because the god Mithras was widely worshiped through the Roman imperial army, and Mithraism is considered by some to have had some influence on the development of Christianity (Soudavar 2014).

For this section I will use three different sources from three different historians. This one scene in The Eagle is fascinating because it raises the question of Mithraism and how this mysterious religion is presented in popular culture. The sources I use are Hugh Bowden’s Mystery Cults of the Ancient World (2010), Roger Beck, The Religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire: Mysteries of the Unconquered Sun (2007), and Manfred Clauss, The Roman Cult of Mithras: The God and his Mysteries (2000).

Hugh Boden’s Mystery Cults of the Ancient World has two chapters dedicated to Mithraism. At the beginning of the first of these chapters, he discusses the excavations of
the temples where the Cult of Mithras worshiped. These temples were called Mithraea. These places of worship are where the rites of Mithra took place indoors. These temples were constructed all over the Roman Empire with some found as far north as Hadrian's Wall in Britain and as far east as Dura Europos on the river Euphrates (Bowden 2010, 182). These Mithraea varied in size, but they all had several features in common. They all had a rectangular shape, with space for seating along the long sides, and displayed a central cult image, a relief-sculpture showing the tauroctony (bull-killing), at the end opposite the entrance (Bowden 2010, 182). The followers of Mithras tried to design their places of worship as caves and if possible, would build their places of worship in caves (Bowden 2010, 182).

The most important item in the Mithraeum was the tauroctony, a relief-sculpture showing Mithras killing a bull. The iconography on the tauroctony included various planets and the various signs of the zodiac (Bowden 2010, 187). Boden explains that these signs surrounded the sun, and the sun is called Deus Sol Invictus Mithras, or the 'Unconquered Sun God Mithras' (Bowden 2010, 187). This is explained in a story about the origins of Mithras. The legend of Mithras's birth was displayed in images carved into walls of the Mithraeum. The images show Mithras rising, fully formed, out of a rock or sometimes an egg, holding a sword and a torch. He chases the bull, which is associated with the moon, and eventually catches and kills it. Either because of this or earlier, he sets the seasons moving, promoting the growth of crops. Finally, after killing the bull, Mithras shares a meal with the sun god, seated on the carcass of the bull. This last scene adds some complexity to the understanding of Mithras's identity: he is a companion of the sun god, but he is himself also the sun (Bowden 2010, 188).
Boden discusses the initiation rituals and different classes of the Cult of Mithras. There were seven grades or levels: Corax (Raven), Nymphus (Bridegroom), Miles (Soldier), Leo (Lion), Persis (Persian), Heliodromos (Sun-runner) and Pater (Father) (Bowden 2010, 190). Each grade was paired to a celestial planet, which are Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Moon, Sun and Saturn (Bowden 2010, 190). There was an initiation into each grade. From written descriptions and from the evidence of some ancient Roman frescoes, it seems that some of the initiations may have been similar to a mock execution where either the initiate would be blindfolded with hands tied behind his back or would be shot at with an arrow (Bowden 2010, 193). All of the initiates were male (Bowden 2010, 196).

Bowden writes extensively about why men joined the cult of Mithras. Social advancement was one motivation because Mithraism was closely associated with the emperor and the Roman state as well as with the cult of the Unconquered Sun (Bowden 2010, 197). This was important because Emperor Aurelian (r. 270-275) supported the Cult of Sol Invictus prominently during his life (Bowden 2010, 197). However there were other appealing factors that contributed to the cult's popularity.

A primary reason was that the cult of Mithras offered its initiates a feeling of place in the universe (Bowden 2010, 197). Many initiates appreciated the feeling of belonging to a privileged group even though the privileges did not extend outside the places of worship (Bowden 2010, 197). However Mithraism lost out to Christianity. Although Bowden states that he will not examine how Christianity became the dominant religion of the Roman Empire (Bowden 2010, 204), his book does contain some useful information on the topic. He describes how critics of Christianity claimed that Christians
took some rituals from the cult of Mithras, namely the sacrament and baptism (Bowden 2010, 207). This led Protestants to argue that the early Christian church was compromised through the blend of non-Christian rites from mystery cults (Bowden 2010, 207).

Bowden writes that the Christians used the Greek word for "mysteries" in Paul's letters and in some books of the New Testament, but it had a different meaning. The Christian use of the word did not refer to secret cult practices, as it did in the mystery religions, but rather to secret aspects of Christian doctrine (Bowden 2010, 208). Bowden writes that the idea of the triumph of Christianity over the mystery cults is an oversimplification (Bowden 2010, 210). While Christianity was growing in popularity after it became the official religion of the Roman Empire in 313 AD, mystery cults were not extinguished but were driven to the edges of society (Bowden 2010, 210). To me this makes sense. Local areas would have their own local mystery traditions and superstitions. For a long time, the Christian Church would not have been widespread enough to compete with these local traditions. Bowden concludes that there is not enough information for religious historians to fully understand the relationship between Christian and non-Christian sects in the third and fourth centuries (Bowden 2010, 210).

Clauss' book, The Roman Cult of Mithras: The God and his Mysteries, begins by clearly distinguishing between the Persian god Mitra, who was part of Zoroastrianism, and the Roman god, Mithras. According to Clauss, the Persian god Mitra was the god of contracts, agreements, and treaties (Clauss 2000, 3). According to Clauss, the Persian texts of the Vendidad wrote that Ahura Mazda referred to Mitra as the Sun God (Clauss 2000, 3). In the dualistic religion of Zoroastrianism, Mitra was the sun battling against
the darkness, therefore he is the sun and also the god of good faith and loyalty in addition
to agreements (Clauss 2000, 4). This is where I believe the confusion about the
Mithraism being an extension of Zoroastrianism originated. Yet it appears that the nature
of Mithras was complicated because Clauss notes that Mitra is the Persian name for the
sun (Clauss 2000, 4). As a result there is a link between the various Sun Gods of
antiquity: Mitra, Apollo, and Helios (Clauss 2000, 7).

However, Clauss discourages belief in a direct continuity between the Persian
Mitra and the Roman Mithras (Clauss 2000, 7). During the wars between the Roman
Empire and the Sassanid Empire, anti-Persian sentiments were prominent (Clauss 2000,
7). The Emperor Diocletian (ruled 284 to 305) outlawed Manichaeism referring to it as a
religion from ‘the Persians who are our enemies’ yet he dedicated an altar to Mithras,
calling him a protector of the Roman Empire, therefore he considered Mithras as a
Roman god (Clauss 2000, 7). Clauss concludes that "Mithraism was an independent
creation with its own unique value within a given historical, specifically, Roman, context
(Clauss 2000, 7).

The nature of the Roman god Mithras seems to be one god among many and
related to many (Clauss 2000, 16). The cult of Mithras proclaimed there were many
ways to truth and it was one of many paths (Clauss 2000, 16). I believe this fluidity and
similarity to other religions was why Mithras was accepted by the Roman emperors
(Clauss 2000, 25). Although the cult was not sponsored by the state, nevertheless
admission was encouraged (Clauss 2000, 25). Since the reign of Marcus Aurelius (r. 161
to 180) the cult of Mithras was closely related to the imperial cult (Clauss 2000, 23).
Then by the reign of Emperor Commodus (r. 176 to 192), the word Invictus started to be
used with the emperor and the sun (Clauss 2000, 23). The sun and the emperor started to be intertwined as protectors and guardians of the Roman empire (Clauss 2000, 25). Then Roman inscriptions had a phrase Sol Invictus Mithras (Clauss 2000, 25). According to Clauss, the patron deity of Emperor Aurelian (r. 270-275) and the god of this mystery religion were one and the same (Clauss 2000, 25).

But are Sol Invictus and Mithras the same god? Personally, I do not know. If you were to ask me a definite answer, I would say no. What I would say is that in my opinion the doctrines of the cult of Mithras were compatible with many religions and cultures around the world and as a result, Mithras can be inserted within an existing religion. For example, every civilization had a sun god and Mithras as another sun god would be seen as an extension. Since Mitra was also the Persian sun god, he fits in many other cultures (Clauss 2000, 3). Plus his doctrines have universal appeal.

After reading Clauss, I believe the initiates of Mithras learned doctrines as they advanced higher in the various orders of the cult. To review, the grades are: Corax (Raven), Nymphus (Bridegroom), Miles (Soldier), Leo (Lion), Perses (Persian), Heliodromos (Sun-runner) and Pater (Father) (Bowden 2010, 190). It is possible that, during the initiation to the Raven rank, the initiates would dress like Ravens to develop a connection with Mithras, thus the initiates would relate with Mithras (Clauss 2000, 133). Not much is said in regard to the Bridegroom but Clauss mentions that the Bridegrooms were under the Protection of Venus. I believe this means that the initiates of this degree are taught that Mithras protects them (Clauss 2000, 134).³⁴ The Soldier rank is different

---

³⁴ It is my opinion that Venus is an extension of Mithras.
because there is some evidence that the initiate would enter the rank through a special rite like a mock execution in which the initiate would say ‘My Crown is Mithras.’ This performing this ritual, the initiate would learn the virtue of loyalty (Clauss 2000, 135). During the initiation for the rank of Lion, the initiate is supposed to cleanse his hands with honey instead of water (Clauss 2000, 135). This teaches the Lions to keep themselves pure from anything distressing, loathsome, or harmful (Clauss 2000, 135). The initiate into the Persian rank cleans his hands with honey as the Lion does, but their duty is to preserve others (Clauss 2000, 136). The next rank, Runner of the Sun, also has a duty to protect (Clauss 2000, 137). The highest rank, Father, presides over the congregation (Clauss 2000, 137). It is my opinion that the more you advance in the ranks of Mithras, the more is required of you. I get this idea because Clauss briefly mentions that there would have been multiple fathers in a congregation and that part of their role was to teach those in the lower ranks (Clauss 2000, 138; cf. Bowden 2010, 189). In addition to the ethical teachings, Mithras was introduced as a just and merciful god who helps his followers (Clauss 2000, 144). Sadly, because the Mithraic teachings were not written down, we have no knowledge of the doctrines of Mithras except for some mosaics, relief sculptures, and indirect mentions from contemporary sources (Clauss 2000, 145).

Most of the surviving contemporary sources came from Christian writers (Clauss 2000, 145). Clauss believes that the standoff between Christianity and Mithraism was a fascinating point in history, yet he disagrees with the dominant historical debate called "Mithras or Christ" (Clauss 2000, 168). He writes that neither religion planned to be the dominant religion in the empire, both were individual and personal religions (Clauss
2000, 168). Despite some similar beliefs and customs, Christian writers did not like followers of Mithras and made them look as ridiculous as possible in their writings (Clauss 2000, 169). Others altered the Christmas story and proclaimed that the wise men of the East were magi of Mithras, therefore a triumph of Christianity over Mithraism (Clauss 2000, 169).

After the Emperor Constantine established Christianity as the official religion of the Roman empire (313 AD), conditions changed for Mithraism. Christians started attacking Mithraea temples and the practitioners of Mithraism, although the situation was not as simple as one might expect. After reading Manfred Clauss’s book *The Roman Cult of Mithras: The God and his Mysteries*, I believe there were two motives, namely, politics and revenge. Constantine (r. 306 to 337) had political motives for persecuting Mithras. Licinius (r. 308 to 324) fought Constantine for control of the Roman Empire in 324 under the banner of Mithras (Clauss 2000, 170). Therefore persecution of Mithras was partially a political policy on Constantine's part to secure his power from his political rival (Clauss 2000, 171).

Roger Beck’s book, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire: Mysteries of the Unconquered Sun*, discusses the doctrine of Mithraism. Roger Beck focuses on iconography and he believes that his is an important aspect of the cult since

---

35 I am no stranger to the ‘intolerant Christians’ trope. I feel like this is a lazy way for historians to explain why Christians attacked other religions. I feel some historians ignore the fact that other religions persecuted their rival sects just as frequently as Christians did. Furthermore, there are additional factors involved other than a general dislike of the ‘infidel.’
Greco-Roman culture centers around iconography (Beck 2007, 19). Beck critiques religious historians who treat Christian iconography with great respect while the iconography of other religious groups is treated more harshly (Beck 2007, 21). Just like the cross is important for Christianity, the icon of Mithras slaying the bull was important for Mithraism (Beck 2007, 21). The next icon Beck mentions is an image of a grand feast hosted by Mithras with other gods and mortal worshipers in attendance. Thus, Beck concludes that the feast was a sacrament (Beck 2007, 22). Through this example, Roger Beck argues that iconography is more trustworthy than written sources because our written sources were all written by Christian writers and thus they contain erroneous information (Beck 2007, 22). Beck also notes that the ritual for Mithras slaying the bull was a Roman construct and not a Persian one (Beck 2007, 29). However, he did not embellish much on this piece of information.

In *The Eagle* (2011), Marcus is seen praying to Mithras in a ritualistic manner. He uses a small wooden eagle as something like a crucifix. He use the eagle in his rituals to Mithras. There is no evidence that the eagle had any place in Mithraic cult worship, however. With this, it appears the producers wished to associate Mithraism with the eagle and to present the cult of Mithras as a precursor to Christianity. Other than this small scene, we do not see much of Mithraism in the film. The book that the film is based on, *The Eagle of the Ninth* (1954), written by Rosemary Sutcliff, does provide a little more information, however. The story tells how Marcus passed the initiation, enabling him to be a member of the Raven degree (Sutcliff 1954, 2).

---

3.3.4 Conclusion

This film shows that there is a clear conflict between filmmakers and historians. Filmmakers see a mystery and they want it resolved because a plot requires a beginning, climax, and an end. This excites the audience and allows them to return home satisfied after a good story.

A historian knows mysteries cannot be solved overnight. The mystery of the Ninth Legion started in the 1700s and even to this day historians are still debating over the evidence. Roman mystery cults are still a mystery because much information about them became lost. As a result, in both cases, more information is needed before we can answer these mysteries. The decline of the Roman military and empire did not start with a series of bad decisions or one bad ruler. Rather it was a culmination of various emperors trying to solve the same problem but with different strategies.

Yet the way this period is presented in film makes sense when considered in the context of contemporary issues. The historical inaccuracies of the film also reveal an important aspect of our society. Our society wants instant gratification and simple, straight answers. And they assume history will give it to them. It does not.

3.4 Rome Final Section

3.4.1 Rome as the looking glass of the United States

This final section will be an analysis of all three of the Roman films. First, I will talk about the legacy of Rome in popular culture. I believe this is important especially for Western civilization because Americans have always felt connected to Rome, whether it
is in novels, films, video games, or theater. There is also the question of how different presentations of Rome in American popular culture relate to one another. For example, *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1959) was based on a novel of the same name, but it also made a conscious attempt to be different from previous films with this name (Frayling 2012, 93). It was filmed as a sword-and-sandal film and in Eastmancolor. Because two of the films take place in Pompeii, I will also write about this Roman city. I will focus on the destruction of Pompeii and how the excavations there give historians a wonderful account of Roman life. I discuss the fact that it was a resort town and there is no evidence of Christians in Pompeii (Frayling 2012, 93). All three films connect Rome with the United States in some way. The 1935 version of *Pompeii* was a Depression-era film that criticized the greed for money and used Christianity to urge the audience to show compassion and concern for their fellow men. The 1959 edition of *Pompeii*, by contrast, showed a court system and a set of laws similar to those of the United States. *The Eagle*, which was released in 2011, is a critique of America as a superpower and its involvement in the Iraq War. The film focuses on the main character’s quest to regain the eagle (or military standard) of the 9th legion, but he is confronted by a soldier who claims that the Romans had no right to be in Britain. Here, I think, the reason behind the movie was to critique American involvement in the Iraq War and I feel like this distorts history because Roman culture demanded expansion to showcase the military values of their society (Donstan 2002, ciii). The question is why are we meant to think about Rome as the United States? Why are we supposed to feel a kinship to them? I feel the producers may be using political and cultural parallels between America and Rome to ask whether the
decline of the Roman empire could happen to us and this is why through the section, I will discuss Rome as another America.

Rome lasted for a thousand years, and it left a footprint on Western civilization and the wider world. If you live in the United States and tour the capital and several buildings built in the earlier years of the republic, you are surrounded by large marble buildings with columns. The form of government created by the founding fathers came from the lessons of the Roman Republic. As a result, the United States, as the youngest of the western powers, feels a kinship to Rome. Mary Beard, in her book *SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome* expresses the belief that history repeats itself in modern Western political culture and wrote how “we shall find many more of these political conflicts, disputed interpretations and sometimes uncomfortable echoes of our times” (Beard 2015, 83). She advises her readers to carefully think about how the history of Rome could still benefit us today.

Hollywood picked up on this as early as the 1930s with the craze about Pompeii. However, it was less of a desire to understand the past and more of a desire to entertain and promote various ideas. *The Last Days of Pompeii* 1935 used Rome as a backdrop, but it was used to promote a contemporary idea. This film was made at the time of the Great Depression. I believe this story of scorning the love of riches and instead loving and helping your fellow man is a critique of the love of money that started the Great Depression. I believe that the *Last Days of Pompeii* was intended as a cultural critique to convince the audience that there were other ways of finding happiness besides the comforts and love of money. The film suggests that Christianity is a better path to happiness than the pursuit of money. It is also an attempt to critique the upper class to
follow the teaching of Christ, encouraging them, as it is said in the Bible, to give their money to help the poor.

After World War Two, Rome’s influence on popular culture was still strong. I covered most of this in in section 2.2.1. By the time Skouras acquired the rights for The 300 Spartans the film was already at the preproduction stage. To compensate for the inexperience, Skouras negotiated with the Italians for the purchase of all the preparatory work for the film, including the costumes. This borrowing of Roman material helped the film production become more affordable. From his sources, Nikoloutsos discovered that the filmmakers did not use historical advisors and this likely contributed to the Romanization of the costumes (Nikoloutsos 2013, 276). As a result, American filmgoers were more exposed to Roman iconography and this contributed to the Americans' familiarity with the Roman civilization.

The film The Last Days of Pompeii 1959 was also used to compare Rome to America. Around the year 1959, the relations between America and the Soviet Union were not the best. During the Cold War, which lasted approximately from the end of World War Two to the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Soviet dictators (especially Khrushchev) would repeatedly threaten the United States with utter destruction (Gaddis 2005, 46 and 70). The United States was in a propaganda warfare with the Soviet Union and one of the trump cards the US had was the presentation that it was a fair government rather than the arbitrary dictatorship of the Soviet Union (Gaddis 2005, 112).

This is important because a scene in the film revolves around a trial. It takes place about in the middle of the film. The character Ione is speaking in defense of the Christians. One of the members of the court accuses her of being a Christian. One of his
fellow court members rebukes him for a baseless accusation against a citizen of Rome. However, Ione confesses to being a Christian and in this way she is set up for martyrdom. The Romans had an understanding of the importance of citizenship and Roman citizens had rights that non-citizens did not have.

The Roman Republic had a system of laws and customs which the Romans believed protected their liberty. This was the basis of the idea of a Roman citizen. And the idea of a Roman citizen continued into the imperial period. A Roman citizen was different from a standard subject of the empire. Throughout the period of antiquity, the idea of citizenship was guarded jealously by the Romans (Abbott 1963, 103). These rights were written on the Twelve Tables with one notable right, the right to appeal a capital case to an assembly (Abbott 1963, 104). This assembly was designed to serve as a counterbalance to the local magistrate (Abbott 1963, 104). Furthermore, the Roman government protected their citizens even when abroad (Abbott 1963, 105). Roman citizens also had the right to settle their disputes in court (Levick 1985, 55). As a historian, it is my opinion that Ione’s trial fits a Roman’s right to appeal a capital case to an assembly.

The primary villain in the film is the head of the Cult of Isis who is supporting acts of banditry in order to fund an army of mercenaries with the goal of regaining Egypt’s independence from the Romans. The leader explains that this is a war to avenge the Romans’ conquest and enslavement of Egyptians. This is historically accurate, in that the Cult of Isis did have a prominent presence in Pompeii and Isis was a highly regarded
goddess in both Rome and Pompeii. On the other hand, the conquest of Egypt had occurred over a century earlier, and yet, in the film, the members of the Cult of Isis talk as if this event was recent. I do not know why this talk of the Egyptian race was put in the film except as a motive for the villains to enact their plan for revenge.

While these ideas made Rome feel familiar to contemporary American audiences, historians know there were clear differences between Rome and the United States. The key difference was that the Roman empire was an autocratic government ruled by an emperor that was hereditary while the United States is a republic, with a president who is elected by the citizens every four years.

The *Eagle* shows another way in which Rome is presented as another United States. Halfway into the film, Marcus and his slave meet a deserter from the Ninth Legion named Lucius. Lucius escaped from the battle in which Marcus’s father was killed and joined with the Selgovae tribe who took him in, and he started a family. In a later scene while he is talking to Marcus, he says to Marcus “I don’t know what your father’s orders were but we had it coming. Why did they have to come north? There is nothing here worth taking. Couldn’t they have been satisfied with what they had? They always have to push and push on for more conquests, more territories, more wars.” This sounded like several critics of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Many Americans never heard of Iraq or Afghanistan and wondered why we were involved in these wars and

---

37 Petersen (2006). The article mentions the Temple of Isis as one of the first structures excavated in 1764.
believed there were ulterior motives. As far as many Americans were concerned, these wars were not justified, and the United States should pull out of the Middle East.

This sentiment is shared by one of the Roman aristocrats who disagreed with Marcus’s plan to send a man north to get the eagle. He says “The loss of the Ninth was humiliating enough, without adding another pointless death.” To this Marcus stood up in his chair and looked like he was going to kill the guy if his uncle did not intervene. Although Marcus was angry because a politician insulted his family’s name and the legacy of his deceased father, this scene can be compared to the distance between civilians and military families in the US today. The sense of divide between those who have served in the military and those who have not in the film is portrayed like the similar divide in the United States (Fallows 2015).

Later Marcus finds a Roman deserter named Lucius who tells him of the destruction of the Ninth Legion and tells him that the Seal People took the eagle from that legion. When Lucius tells Marcus that his slave Esca knows where it is, Marcus has a conflict with his slave. Marcus feels betrayed because Esca could have told him from the start and wasted several weeks searching for it. Marcus says “Your tribe was there and they butchered my father’s men like dogs!” However Esca yells back “Your father came to kill! He came to punish us cause we would not bow to the name of Rome! Yes I’d heard of this place. To me and to all my people, it is the place of heroes.” This leads to an argument and later a brawl between Marcus and Esca. This scene might be similar to a common problem in contemporary America, namely two people getting into a fight over different politics. By this point (2011) the Iraq war was an inflammatory topic in US politics. By showing this conflict between a Roman and his slave, this story seems to
exemplify the phrase, “one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter.” This phrase was common during years when Americans lost interest in the war in Iraq.

Another scene is when Marcus is visiting his uncle and several important men come for dinner. There is a discussion about a rumor that the eagle of the Ninth was discovered and was being held by the Seal people, the most notorious tribe in northern Britain. Marcus’s uncle believes that Rome should act, and he asks his friends what they should do. One of the men says “Rome would love to get the eagle back. But politics being politics, no Senate is going to risk thousands of lives on a tainted legion. My hands are tied.” It is at this point that Marcus gets the idea to send one man north to get the eagle. This scene may seem to be a trope of the fat bureaucrats sitting on their hands while the hero goes to complete the mission. However this looks like a jab at politicians. It is no secret the American public has no love for their politicians (Nelson 1994).

Early in the film Marcus sends out a patrol to investigate the disappearance of a grain delivery. In the morning, after a battle, Marcus and the garrison sees the patrol being dragged out and captured by the local Britons. The British leader on a horse turns to his fellow Britons and shouts: “Our gods will bring us victory today!” The leader then forces the Romans to their knees as he says, “On your knees, seed of evil.” The leader then rants about all the actions the Romans did to the Britons before he takes a sword from one of his warriors and kills one in front of the garrison. The Roman garrison is unnerved by this and Marcus launches a sally outside the army camp to rescue the patrol because he got them in trouble in the first place.

This scene draws comparisons to the fate of American and allied individuals captured by Islamic terrorist organizations in the Middle East in the aftermath of the
attack on Iraq (in 2003) and the ensuing Afghanistan and Iraq War. When an American or a citizen of an allied nation which was a member of the coalition was captured, there was a risk they would be killed by beheading on video tape. The death of Nicholas Berg, an American radio tower repairman is an example (BBC 2004). This served as a means to cause terror and revenge for actions committed by the coalition forces (Whitaker 2004). In the film, the Britons call the Romans spawn of evil which sounds similar to the rants said by the terrorists. Like the Britons in The Eagle (2011), prominent figures of the terrorist organizations used videos to rant about various actions the United States took that they don’t like and calling Americans the ‘Great Satan (Seib 2019).  

3.4.2 Pompeii

The two Pompeii films, by contrast, describe a particular period in the history of Rome. Pompeii was destroyed by a volcano on Mt. Vesuvius in the year 79 AD. Within a single day, one of the most important ports in the empire was buried under volcanic ash.

However Pompeii was not just an important port town on the Bay of Naples. It was a resort town. The town was filled with villas as the Roman aristocrats went to Pompeii to relax during the summer months (Butterworth 2005, 63). The beaches of Pompeii were greatly enjoyed by the elites and they would build expensive estates along the coast (Butterworth 2005, 63). In addition the fertile slopes was great for growing grapes and olives (Butterworth 2005, 232 and 243). These were coveted by Roman elites for wine and olive oil, which the aristocracy used regularly. In addition, the slave

38 According to Alarabiya, the terrorist organization Al-Qaeda used rhetoric borrowed from Iran.
population was pretty large in Pompeii to serve the needs of the upper class which ranged from waiting on them to fulfilling sexual appetites (Butterworth 2005, 133).

The population of Pompeii changed regularly and some families left for various reasons, primarily earthquakes (Butterworth 2005, 180). Those who remained held a monopoly on the political power of the city (Butterworth 2005, 86). Marcus’s tale of from rags to riches in the 1935 version of The Last Days of Pompeii would be a difficult uphill battle if it happened historically. Cicero once joked that a man had a better chance of getting into office in Rome than in Pompeii (Butterworth 2005, 86).

The ‘new man’ is the first man of a family to arise to the rank of the aristocracy in ancient Rome and political office. The Master of the Arena, which is the office attained by Marcus in the 1935 film, is what one would see as a political office. This film is as a rags to riches story, showing how Marcus rises from poverty to the ranks of the nobility. Such social mobility was possible during the Roman Empire. But the film also portrays the dangers of valuing money at the expense of Christian values and it criticized the nepotism of Pompeiiian politics. In the film Marcus is treated with respect by Pontius Pilate and the new praetor (or governor) of Pompeii. This is historically plausible, because Pompeii’s cutthroat and nepotism political climate would make it difficult for an outsider like Marcus to achieve a political office.

Pompeii is a fully-preserved Roman town. Although it was tragic for the inhabitants who died, it has given us an incredible amount of information about daily life in the Roman empire during the first century AD. Pompeii was discovered in the late 1700s, and excavations have been going on ever since. Everything from buildings to the imprints of bodies were preserved. And parts of the city are still being excavated today
(Reuters 2020). The more that Pompeii is excavated, the more information we have about the life of a Roman town and the lives of the Romans. This provides insights into how archaeology can help historians learn more about this society. This historical knowledge, in turn, can be used by filmmakers for entertainment.

Because Pompeii was so completely preserved, it is easy for the city to be replicated by filmmakers. It is like stepping into a time capsule. The film The Last Days of Pompeii (1935) was clearly influenced by the excavations of Pompeii. For example, the thermopolium (snack bar) shown in The Last Days of Pompeii (1935) looks very similar to a number of thermopolia that have been excavated from the site. A thermopolium excavated in 2020 is an excellent example, and looks remarkably similar to the one in the film (Reuters 2020).

In the 1959 film of the same name, the Christians are a persecuted minority in Pompeii. The first scene of the film depicts a Roman villa in flames with masked men running around sacking the estate and killing the inhabitants. After killing all the people, the bandits paint crosses all over the house, framing the Christians for the attack. The authorities of Pompeii then blame the Christians for these attacks on wealthy citizens and anti-Christian sentiments rise. Later in the film, Glaucus discovers that the bandits work for the Temple of Isis.

The historical record of Roman history includes something similar. During the rule of emperor Nero, Rome was plagued by a huge fire (AD 64). The story goes that Nero played a lyre while the city burned, however the accuracy of this history is questionable. This story highlights the fact that Nero was an unpopular emperor. Nero needed a scapegoat and so he blamed the Christians for the fire in order to divert the
blame to someone else (Champlin 2003, 121). The historian Chaplin writes that Nero had Christians put to death by "being thrown to the beasts, crucified, and being burned alive" (Champlin 2003, 122). This was the first widespread persecution of the Christians under the authorization of the Roman government. Despite these problems, the persecution of Christians was generally practiced only locally and sporadically (with Nero's persecution being an exception) (Baker et al. 1940, 19). This allowed Christianity to grow at a steady rate (Baker et al. 1940, 19).

However relations between the Roman state and the early Christians were strained. The many festivals in Rome required the participants to worship a number of different gods, but the early Christians firmly held to the belief of worshiping one god and never worshiping idols. This made the Christians seem like enemies of the social order in which religions played a vital part. Whenever a Christian was arrested it was under the charge of atheism, because Christians did not have idols or temples to their god (Baker et al. 1940, 19). Another object which baffled Roman elites was that Christians revered a man who was crucified like a common criminal. However Christian apologists fought back, using several arguments to defend their religion. Christian apologists made extensive use of the Old Testament to show that Jesus fulfilled the words of the prophets and made the argument that Christianity is an extension of Judaism (Baker et al. 1940, 21). Furthermore, Christians defended themselves by claiming to have a good moral character while some of the pagan rituals were deemed as obscene and ridiculous even by their own philosophers (Baker et al. 1940, 21). Lastly, Christian apologists made use of the term “logos” (Baker et al. 1940, 21). The apologists argued that Logos was the reason and wisdom of God manifest in the world (Baker et al. 1940, 21). Therefore they
believed that Jesus was the full incarnation of human life with the ideas of reason and wisdom (Baker et al. 1940, 21).

As mentioned above, there is no evidence that there were any Christians in Pompeii. But the occasional persecution of Christians throughout the Roman empire might be a plausible explanation that would justify the creative liberty of allowing Christians into Pompeii in the 1959 film. Furthermore, such persecution fits the narrative of the film because it depicts the destruction of an idolatrous, non-Christian world and the arrival of the virtuous Christians. Since the Soviet Union was known at the time for its state atheism and many Americans are Christian, the producers of The Last Days of Pompeii could present Pompeii as an allegory for the destruction of the sinful Soviet Union and the preservation of the pious, religious United States of America.

To those living in the post-cold War world, these ideas may seem strange because we are accustomed to the Republicans as the party of Christianity. However, during the Cold War and earlier, Christian beliefs were loudly presented in the political arena by both parties. The progressive minded president of the United States, Woodrow Wilson, was devoted to Presbyterian Christian ideas and referred to them often in his speeches (Link 1977, 23.20, speech on the Bible, in Denver, May 7, 1911). I believe that Christian values were stressed by the producers of the 1959 version of The Last Days of Pompeii because they were relatable to the contemporary audience.

In conclusion, Rome is seen as a model civilization for popular culture in the United States. The reasons for this include the classical architecture and the classical knowledge of the founding fathers, who used the lessons of the ancient civilization to create our republic. Humanity tends to be drawn to whatever they are comfortable with
and since America and Rome both were Republics, it makes sense to see how Americans feel a sort of kinship to Rome.

But Rome and the United States are also both imperial powers. Just like the United States, Rome’s culture was influential. Rome controlled the Mediterranean and buildings of Rome are still seen from North Africa to France and from Libya to Spain. The United States also has a culture which has expanded around the globe. American companies are seen even in China and Japan. I discussed in the previous section about the Roman empire and now I will talk a bit about American imperialism. American imperialism has its roots in the Spanish American War (Apr 21, 1898 – Dec 10, 1898) but it continued after World War II (Sep 1, 1939 – Sep 2, 1945) during the Cold War (1947-1989) and it continues still today. But unlike the Romans, the Americans are ambivalent about their overseas power. During the Cold War (1947-1989), the United States took on the role of the reluctant superpower in order to counter the Soviet Union (Bacevich 2002, 9). For years the Americans continued to be ambivalent about this role because the American culture was ill suited for an expansionist policy because of widespread sentiment of isolationism (Bacevich 2002, 19). The idea of a reluctant superpower protecting the world from the Soviet Union dominated American politics during the Cold War, and, as a result America was the only superpower left. At the time it was believed that America would be the sole superpower until the end of time (Bacevich 2002, 221).

When the September 11, 2001, attacks happened, America responded in the name of past glories of fighting against an evil like Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union (Bacevich 2002, 230). The enemy was ‘terror.’ However ‘terror’ is a tactic, not an ideology (Bacevich 2002, 231). Under President Bush, America was committed to
creating an open world (Bacevich 2002, 232). In December 2001, President Bush declared America would lead the world to peace (Bacevich 2002, 238). To many Americans, the United States was not an empire but as post 9/11 caused America to spread its influence and military force around the world, it bore the trappings of an empire through its massive spheres of influence (Bacevich 2002, 243). In my opinion, in the twenty years that followed, America functioned as an empire whether we wished to admit it or not.

These films, *The Eagle*, *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1935), and *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1959) are an extension of the connection between Rome and the United States in popular culture.  Hollywood uses Rome to reflect American values. The three films considered in this chapter cover a large number of topics. They range from an object lesson to help your fellow man and support Christianity to a critique of America’s involvement in foreign war. However, all three films are unified in relating on American culture to that of Rome. Just as the Romans believed in the Pax Romana, the peace that the Roman empire created throughout the Mediterranean world, Thomas Jefferson called the United States the ‘Empire of Liberty’ (Wood 2009, 738). As a result, America fell into the role of Rome as an empire. However unlike Rome, I believe America is ill suited to the task.
CHAPTER 4: THESIS CONCLUSION

One goal of this thesis was to educate others about the ways in which films fail to portray historical events correctly and where they succeed. This thesis has also considered the question of whether a historical film can be entertaining and play a role in popular culture and still rekindle people’s interest in history (Whitaker 2016, 22).

History is important. Film is important because it can serve to reconnect us with the past. We must be careful because the use of film for history is a delicate balance, but there may be value in using popular culture to teach about history. Films and history have one thing in common: they both represent the experiences of human memory. Films are the memory of the culture and the values of the people while historians are seen as ‘remembrancers’ who record the memories of public events (Burke 2011, 188). Recently there has been a conflict in the historical community requiring historians to be more sensitive to interpretations and distortions of the past (Burke 2011, 188). This conflict comes from the fact that history is increasingly being used to justify political motivations. To stay relevant, historians are trying to adapt to the changing times by clinging to the scholarly world for legitimacy. Furthermore, with the new age of the media, historians are in danger of falling by the wayside if they do not adapt to the new media (Banner 2012, 82). This new media is film.

Historians frequently feel ambivalent about historical films. The situation the historical community must accept is that we now live in a digital and media age and it is not possible to turn back. To survive in a changing world, historians must find a way to adapt. I argue that film can be used to capture the attention of an audience and that sections of a film can be used to provide talking points in discussions about history. The
risk of this is that films tend to embellish the historical record for the sake of emotion or entertainment.

Even documentaries are not immune to this situation as written by Fiona Hobden. In the article “Ancient World Documentaries,” Fiona Hobden considers the history of ancient Greece and Rome on film from the perspective of documentaries. In documentaries, narrators appear to be expert authorities. The scenes display sculptures, art, ruins, and in some cases, reenactors dramatize events. These documentaries are designed to resonate with the viewers' existing knowledge of antiquity in order to appear relevant to an audience. Audiences love to watch a simple film and they might lose interest in a film if it were to drag on for a long time, providing too much information. But Hobden warns that even a documentary can distort history through dramatization. Two noticeable cases that she discusses are the documentaries, *In the footsteps of Alexander the Great* (1998) and *Cleopatra: Portrait of a Killer* (2009). The *Footsteps of Alexander* is narrated by Michael Wood as he traces the length of the route of Alexander’s conquest. Hobden notes that while Wood retraced Alexander's actual route, the places of the shots were sometimes staged for dramatic effect (Hobden 2017, 498). While Wood does show some historic sites, such as crossing the Aegean Sea in a route similar to Alexander and visiting the site of Troy like Alexander, he also makes some gross anachronisms. For example, inside a mediaeval fortress of the Knights Hospitaller at Bodrum he stages an imagined dialogue between two worried soldiers of Alexander’s enemies under siege in Halicarnassus (Hobden 2017, 498). These scenes create tension and capture the imagination of the audience, but they are historically inaccurate and thus misleading. *Cleopatra: Portrait of a Killer* is presented like a true crime story (Hobden
2017, 506). The narrator describes Cleopatra as a woman who is willing to do whatever it takes to succeed (Hobden 2017, 506). Furthermore, the documentary portrays Cleopatra as extremely seductive while downplaying her important political motives for making an alliance with Rome. Nevertheless, the film seems believable because it is a documentary (Hobden 2017, 507). These two documentaries carry weight because in each case a historian is telling the story and this can cause the average viewer to trust that it is being presented accurately. Although she does not openly condemn documentaries, Hobden warns that documentaries can have a powerful effect on their audiences that might cause the audience to have distorted view of history.

This leads to Rosenstone. In his article titled “History in images/History in Words" (2009), Rosenstone discusses the experience of an academic historian working with film. He describes it as an exhilarating and disappointing experience. It is exhilarating because of the opportunity to use the thrills of film to see the fruits of research firsthand, a chance to escape the confines of a library, and the thrill of seeing the works on the big screen through the power of visual media (Rosenstone 2009, 30). Disappointing because he believes that no film can satisfy the historian and Rosenstone believes that something is lost from the page to the screen (Rosenstone (2009, 30). He writes that every time he sees a historical film, he is forced to look for a sense of intellectual equilibrium because he feels like something strips away at the truth and verifiability used by historians (Rosenstone (2009, 31). It is this feeling of loss that causes Rosenstone to believe that no matter how well intended a film producer is on rendering the historical subject faithfully, something happens on the journey from book to the screen. He thinks it has to do with the nature of film. In film, actors take on the role
of historical characters and sometimes films include faceless figures. Rosenstone admits there are similarities between written history and film, but history on film must be held to certain standards.39

These beliefs come from personal experience (Rosenstone 2009, 30). He had the opportunity to see two of his books become movies with one becoming a film while the other became a documentary. The two films in question were *Reds* (1981). This film is about the last five years of the American poet, journalist, and revolutionary, John Reed. The other film was *The Good Fight* (1984), a documentary about the American volunteers who fought in the Spanish Civil War. Both times he felt dissatisfied with the results. However, he did not blame it on the evils of Hollywood, low budget, or limits of the film genre. Instead he blames it on the nature of visual media itself (Rosenstone 2009, 31). Rosenstone writes that the film *Reds* (1981) engages in acts of fiction such as placing John Reed in places he never visited for the sake of drama or unrealistically shortening a long train ride that took place in 1917 (Rosenstone 2009, 31). With the documentary *The Good Fight* (1984), he had other problems because the documentary was based on the memories of the veterans of the Spanish Civil War, which were not reliable (Rosenstone 2009, 31). But the greatest problem was a dispute he had with the director of *The Good Fight* (1984). Rosenstone wanted to include the issue of possible Stalinist terrorism in the ranks of the American volunteers in the Spanish Civil War but the director overruled him because he felt the topic was too complex to add to an already long film (Rosenstone 2009, 36). The result was that the "good guys" were portrayed as

---

39 Rosenstone (2009, 37). Written history is influenced by motives and beliefs of their writers.
completely good, even though that was not necessarily the case. History is complicated and requires details for a complete picture. Films by contrast, require the story to be as simple as possible to avoid losing the attention of the audience. These experiences lead Rosenstone to wonder if there is a point to historians being involved if historical films are so distorted and whether it is still worth it.

But Rosenstone argues in favor of historians being involved with film in his book *History on Film: Film on History* (2006). He argues that the historical books written by historians are like the stories on film. He goes even further and says that film makers and historians have two things in common. Both refer to actual events, moments and movements. Second, both partake in the unreal and fictional (Rosenstone 2006, 2). Rosenstone writes that some historians believe that written fiction is nothing more than a metaphor (Rosenstone 2006, 161). Rosenstone’s aim was to convince historians to use historical film as a gateway to evoke a sense of importance of the past (Rosenstone 2006, 2). He believes the past can be invoked in a meaningful way for the audience and that this is important (Rosenstone 2006, 130).

Hayden White’s article “Historiography and Historiophoty” contains something interesting and his argument is worth considering for my thesis. He said that even written history is like films because written history can be distorted. The difference is that written history holds more legitimacy because it comes from accounts. Yet White believes that even written historical accounts can be misleading (White 2009, 54). He argues that historians should use visual evidence like photos and films as a separate, independent source to be read like a written document. Instead, however, "we are inclined to use visual evidence as a complement of our written discourse" (White 2009, 54). In
discussions, these sources are often criticized as being inadequate (White 2009, 56). In the end, however, the argument comes down to a historian's interpretation. Towards the end of the article, White writes that even in written history, historians fall into the trap of reducing historical actors to character types (White 2009, 58). White concludes that our interpretation of historical films reflects our understanding of how to represent the past (White 2009, 59).

This is where my thesis fits into the field of study. I have continued with Rosenstone’s argument and expanded on it. I have discussed how historians can use film as a fun way to teach others about the past. Rosenstone wondered whether there is a point to historians being involved if historical films are so distorted and whether it is still worth it. My conclusion is yes, it is worth it to be involved. Rosenstone does have a few important concerns, however. The film industry feels the need to embellish information for the sake of creating a film that sells. Even if a film tries to use the sources faithfully, the filmmakers must ensure the film is not too long or it will risk boring the audience. On the other hand, films are important to our world and history is used to inspire films. These films are the average person’s contact with the past and they can use the film as their source for history, especially if a historical film says it is based on a true story. This creates a window of opportunity for historians to start educating others about the past and use the film as the centerpiece of the discussion. This is where my thesis fits into my field of study. I have used my thesis as an example of how films can be used as an asset to talk about history.

However there is another side to this question. From these six films, one can see how the use of the past could be distorted to satisfy other agendas from the producers.
These agendas range from geopolitical situations, to cultural expectations, or simply the desire to make a profit.

I discussed examples of this in my thesis through the various films. Noticeable examples are the use of the Cold war and Iraq War. The Iraq War was presented in *the Eagle* (2011) as the inspiration of the attitude of the Roman deserter Lucius, disillusioned with the Roman Empire’s expansionism. The Cold War was referenced in *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1959), *The 300 Spartans* (1962), and *Alexander the Great* (1959). *Alexander the Great* (1959) presents the United States as the new Athens, an idea worth presenting to everyone abroad and invokes the idea of a Brotherhood of Man through Alexander. *The 300 Spartans* (1962) displays the Spartans fighting against overwhelming odds to protect the ideal of freedom. In addition, I discussed the similarities between Queen Gorgo and Queen Frederika of Greece and the idea of the Mother of the Nation. *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1959) shows the destruction of Pompeii but the Christians survive in the future, thus the producers tell the audience the virtuous Christians will continue to carry the torch of civilization, while the sinful nations will be destroyed by God’s judgement.

The films cover internal issues of the United States and I sued *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1935), This film as made during the Great Depression and critiques the greed of man at the expense of helping their fellow man. Flavius follows the teachings of Christ to love and help others, and later his father Marcus follows suit and redeems himself at the

---

40 I mentioned the character Lucius went against the Roman soldiers who felt demoralized at the constant defensive strategy.
end of the film. Thus the meaning of *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1935) urges their audience to follow the teachings of Chyrist and to ignore the greed for wealth.

I discussed how films are used to create profil and *300* (2006) is a perfect example. Every form of this film was designed for effect and provoke the audience. Everything from the designs of the Spartans to the outrageous presentations of the Persians was designed for effect and to generate money.

Despite these motives I used these films to talk about how these films linked with history. An example is I used the Greek films as a springboard to talk about the Persians. In these sections, I wrote how the Persians were an advanced and powerful civilization during the Classical era with the fatal flaw of being vulnerable to an ineffective leader. In addition I wrote how the Persians contributed positively to the development of our world. I used the two films of *The Last Days of Pompeii* to talk about the nature of Christianity in Rome and how at first Christians were ignored unless an incident happens. In addition I used these films to talk about Pompeii as an archaeological treasure. The Roman Empire as forged from a capable army and I used *The Eagle* (2011) as a means to talk about it. Furthermore I used *The Eagle* (2011) to talk about the mystery of the Ninth Legion and I came to the conclusion that the ninth Legion was folded into the Sixth Legion.

All of these examples are used to discuss how film portrays history. In this thesis I have argued that film can show what was important for the producers' contemporaries to remember. This may sound cliché, but I wish to add more to that. What information in history was common and worth preserving? What I mean to say is that humanity tends to look for things they have in common with people of the past. Whether a person is a
filmmaker or a member of an audience or a historian trying to teach the public about the past; in all cases we look for something we have in common with the past. Although films do distort the past as well as make connections, as historians, we cannot afford to ignore the power of film. Although it sometimes distorts the past, film can also show us the similarities we have with our predecessors. For this reason I conclude that the use of film is an excellent way for us to begin the process of getting others interested in history.

Here I wish to discuss how this can be accomplished. First I must say I believe that historians must be aware of how increasingly powerful influence that film has on the masses. For historians to stay relevant, we must be aware of this. Yet there are ways we can use films to our advantage.

The first idea I have requires historians to be aware of the historical films that are being created. A historian does not have to like it but just be aware. Whenever a historical film is being made, news outlets and the media are full of talkshows and trailers. If a historical film comes out I recommend that historians who have a knowledge of the time-period should get to work on writing a book or article that discusses this historical time period. A noticeable example of this is Paul Cartledge, a historian of Sparta. In his book *Thermopylae: The Battle that Changed the West*, he mentioned *300* (2006) rather briefly in a paragraph, describing the film as a crude, ‘noir’ film (Cartledge 2006, 194). I wish Cartlege discussed more about the film than one paragraph. However, it is possible that he wrote the book and published it before he had a chance to watch the film. This step is also important for historical advisors of historical films to follow. In an ideal world, filmmakers would always listen to historical advisors but this is not the case. I advise film advisors to write a book or publish an article discussing these four things: the
historical medium of the film, the points where the film deviates from history, why the changes were made, and what happened. This requires the historian to be more understanding and less willing to ‘crucify’ historical advisors just because the film in question is not historically accurate.

Another suggestion I have is how to use historical films in a classroom. This is more important because the next generation might be interested in understanding history through film, but they have very limited knowledge. This is problematic because historical films may be these students' only exposure to history and these films may have a strong influence on their perceptions. Yet this situation also presents an opportunity. To make this example easier to understand I will give a few senarios I would use if I were teaching a class in history.

To make this easier, let’s say I am teaching a week’s course on the Greco-Persian War. I would begin with a few clips from 300 (2006). These clips would show the Spartans in combat, the Persians, and Xerxes. This will capture the attention of my students and I will begin the class by asking for their thoughts. Through the conversation that follows, the class will progress to talking about the Persians, Greek military tactics, and Herodatus. In fact, I would add some of Herodotus’s writing as required reading for my students.41 The next class, I would teach my students more about the Persian Wars and I would finish with sections of The 300 Spartans (1962) in which I would point out some of the many references to Herodotus. At the end, the class would have a discussion on the Persian Wars and how they influence us today, especially through film. Should I

---

41 My ‘students’ in this scenario are probably going to hate me.
be sick this week, I would have the class read Herodotus for school work and watch *The 300 Spartans* (1962) with a discussion when I return. This second idea requires the teacher to have a comfortable knowledge on the topic and to plan ahead of time. At the end of the day, these steps can help historians use film to their advantage and further the preservation and discussion of history.

In conclusion, I believe that filmmakers are similar to historians in that they both try to decide which details are important and which are not. Instead of worrying about filmmakers creating an embellished version of history, historians should take the films as a challenge to study the historical context of the film so as to better understand the producers' aims, the audience's desires, as well as the historical events themselves, and the contemporary historical context in which the film was made. Furthermore, researching the historical setting can help us see key differences and similarities which will bring us closer to the past. After all, a famous proverb says "History repeats itself."
WORKS CITED

Primary sources

300 (2006)

* Alexander the Great. 1956
* The 300 Spartans (1962)
* The Eagle. 2011.
* The Last Days of Pompeii. 1935.
* The Last Days of Pompeii. 1959.

Secondary sources


Author unknown. "'Zarqawi' beheaded US man in Iraq." BBC. (May 2004).


https://www.history.com/topics/ancient-history/pompeii.


https://www.thecolosseum.org/gladiators/


https://ew.com/article/2007/03/11/how-300-was-positioned-be-box-office-hit/


Frayling, Christopher. 2012 *Sergio Leone: Something to Do With Death.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.


https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=myzwikTNrV0


Miller, Frank . 1998a."Combat" in *300*. Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Comics.


Ritterling, E. 1925."Legio (64)", in Paulys Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft or Pauly–Wissowa Band XII, Halbband XXIV, cols. 1664–1670. Charleston: Nabu Press. (Translated from German to English)


