

300 Study Guide

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Plot Summary

Leonidas, king of Sparta, leads a small force of three hundred men—his personal bodyguard—to a place known as the Hot Gates to meet a numberless horde of hostile Persians in combat. Prevented by oracular pronouncement from taking the entire Spartan army, Leonidas is fully aware that the mission is suicidal. Joined by about 6,700 other warriors from various Greek cities, Leonidas and his three hundred hold off several assaults by the Persians until eventually they are betrayed.

As a young boy of perhaps ten years, Leonidas, like all Spartan boys, had been driven into the wilderness, alone and unarmed, to test his strength and cunning. Tracked by a huge wolf, Leonidas crafted a flimsy spear and lured the wolf into a narrow fissure in a cliff. The wolf pursued Leonidas until its movement was severely restricted whereupon the boy killed the wolf, returning victorious to Sparta where he was eventually to become king. After reigning for many years Leonidas receives the envoy of king Xerxes of Persia. The envoy demands a token gesture of subjugation to Xerxes—Leonidas refuses to be so abased and kills the envoy and his retinue.

The following year news of a massive Persian invasion reaches Sparta. Leonidas desires to sally against the Persians with the entire Spartan army but, as required by law, first seeks the advice and consent of the ephors—the elders of Sparta. In turn the ephors consult the mystic oracle, a young girl, who demands the Carneia, a religious festival, be observed and insists that no Spartan army mobilize during the religious period. Leonidas, stymied, returns to Sparta without realizing the Persians have successfully bribed the corrupt ephors. Prevented from mobilizing the Spartan army, Leonidas determines to take a walk through the countryside. The queen, sensing his motive, insists his entire personal bodyguard, numbering three hundred, accompany him. Leonidas subsequently walks north with his retinue until meeting—supposedly by happenstance—other soldiers assembling for the defense of Greece.

Leonidas, leading a mixed force of about 7,000 men, reaches a restrictive pass known variously as Hell's Mouth or the Hot Gates; history remembers the location as Thermopylae. There he readies his meager force to meet the vast Persian army, rumored to be composed of hundreds of nations and hundreds of thousands of men. A misshapen hunchback named Ephialtes approaches Leonidas in camp. Ephialtes explains that his father—a Spartan—had, after the birth of a deformed child, gone into exile rather than commit infanticide as required by Spartan law. Ephialtes presents himself as trained and capable, and states a desire to fight alongside the Spartans to regain the honor of his family. Leonidas declines to accept him and Ephialtes throws himself off a cliff in an unsuccessful suicide.

The Persian army arrives and various encounters are fought. Every battle proves a decisive victory for Leonidas and his three hundred Spartans, and the Persian army suffers horrible and constant losses. Then Ephialtes regains consciousness and, distraught at Leonidas' rebuke, seeks out the Persian king Xerxes to inform the king of a hidden mountain pass which leads around the Hot Gates. Within hours, elements of the

vast Persian army cross around the Hot Gates and encircle the Greeks. Aside from a handful of exceptions, all non-Spartan Greeks desert their post as everyone realizes that to remain behind means certain death.

Leonidas exults, realizing his name will be immortalized and his death will rally not only Sparta, but all of Greece, to a common cause. He dispatches the Spartan Dilios, a wounded storyteller, to escape from the Hot Gates and carry the news to Sparta. In a final battle Leonidas and his three hundred perform their honorable duty with distinction before being killed to a man. As Leonidas predicted, their signal action galvanizes Greek resistance. The graphic novel concludes with Dilios leading a company of Spartans into battle at Plataea. Prior to charging into combat, he encourages his men by recounting the story of Leonidas at the Hot Gates and then recalling the recent Athenian decisive naval victory at Salamis.

Chapter 1 - Honor

Chapter 1 - Honor Summary

The graphic novel opens with a depiction of a small body of men in armor marching in file across broken, rocky terrain. The narrator, speaking in the first-person, plural, voice in the present tense states the body of men is marching from Sparta in Lakonia and the object of the march is for glory and honor. The men are led by a single musician playing pipes. One frame is dated 480 BC. The men wear heavy bronze helmets, carry large circular shields, and are armed with short swords and heavy spears. They are clothed in a red cloak and a simple leather loin strap—and are otherwise naked. After marching for three days in intense heat, one soldier, named Stelios, grows faint and momentarily stumbles. He is reprimanded and disciplined by the troops' captain who beats him for his inexcusable lapse of discipline. After several minutes King Leonidas orders the captain to stop the beating. The captain does not hear and Leonidas responds by in turn beating the captain insensible. Stelios is then ordered to carry the captain, the entire troop is notified they will continue without food for the day, and the march resumes. Leonidas then addresses Stelios as 'Stumblios' and the unfortunate nickname sticks with the young man for the next approximate week.

That night, Dilios spins stories to inspire the men. Their favorite story is about a young boy of about ten years age who leaves Sparta and travels into the wilderness to prove himself. In the apparent rite of initiation into manhood, the boy is expected to survive for a period of time with no supplies or equipment. He fashions a crude and light spear and is then stalked by a ravenous wolf. The boy carefully leads the wolf into a narrow fissure in a cliff, described as 'a narrow wound'. The wolf pursues until it becomes wedged and then the boy uses the light spear to kill the wolf. He then returns as a man to Sparta wrapped in the wolf's pelt, and later becomes the King—King Leonidas. Dilios comments that forty years have since passed.

King Leonidas listens distractedly to Dilios' tale. Then his thoughts drift back to events of approximately one year ago—events which made the current march a military and political necessity. A Persian envoy had arrived in Sparta with an entourage. The Persian envoy had demanded that Leonidas provide a jar of earth and a jar of water to send to the distant Persian King Xerxes as a sign of subjugation. The Persian envoy urged Leonidas to comply with the offer and carefully consider any response. Instead, Leonidas muses that his distant rival Athens had already refused, and then he himself refused. Noting that the arrogant Persian envoy was about to find plenty of earth and water, Leonidas cast him into a vast well. The remainder of the Persian envoy's entourage is then massacred at Leonidas' orders.

Chapter 1 - Honor Analysis

The graphic novel presents a fictionalized interpretation of historic events which did in fact occur at a place known to the ancient Greeks as Thermopylae, or the Hot Gates. In broad outline the graphic novel is historically correct but numerous details are freely interpreted, modified, or cut from the whole cloth to allow a graphic presentation to modern readers—e.g., the graphic novel is not scholastically accurate history. However, it is nevertheless an exciting read which is topically significant and the artistic rendering is excellent. The timeline of the graphic novel is fairly complicated but also extremely easy to follow. The text presents a series of events which spans forty-one years; virtually the entire novel is narrated by an unnamed narrator who generally speaks from the first-person, plural, point of view from a period in time after virtually all of the text's action has completed. The complexity of the timeline arises from the fact that the retrospective narration further includes several 'flashback' sequences to earlier times. A concise and approximate chronological timeline is as follows: c. 520 BC, Leonidas as a young boy succeeds in a rite of initiation by killing a huge wolf largely through stratagem; 481 BC, a Persian Envoy reaches Sparta, demands a symbol of surrender, and is killed by Leonidas, now King of Sparta; 480 BC, Leonidas leads a force of 300 Spartans on a two week voyage to the Hot Gates where they engage the invading Persian army for three days prior to their ultimate defeat; and 479 BC, Dilios recounts the tale of Leonidas and the 300 at the Hot Gates and the story of Salamis to soldiers in a large Greek army who then charge off to the battle of Plataea. History indeed records that the Spartan victory at Thermopylae, the Athenian naval victory at Salamis, and the combined Greek army decisive victory at Plataea successfully drove the Persian Empire out of Greece for the next several decades—and also set the stage for the devastating Peloponnesian war.

Chapter 1, titled Honor, is a conceptual summary of Spartan honor. It depicts a society based upon the unquestioning and complete subjugation of the individual to the greater society—and ironically establishes such a society as an island of sanity and democracy in a world of despotic empires! The Spartans are depicted as a wholly militarized city where the males spend all day in martial and physical training and the females expect and demand the males to be pitiless and martially dominant. Indeed, the feats of endurance and physical mastery demonstrated by the Spartans throughout the graphic novel makes them nearly superhuman in martial ability. Contrary to historical reality, the Spartans are depicted as fiercely heterosexual and monogamously devoted to their wives. Infants born with physical deformities are subjected to infanticide through exposure. Spartan military life is permeated with rigorous training and ritualized humiliation. Furthermore punishment for even slight infractions—such as stumbling on a prolonged march—is corporal and severe. The Spartan military structure appears to be fairly typical—that is, the King is the absolute field commander from which there is no appeal. Under the King is a captain who sees to the daily administration of the troop of three hundred. The captain is aided by other officers although their rank is not specified (the men address them as 'sir'). The Spartans march to music from simple mouth pipes and they are fortunate to have within their ranks practices storytellers who bolster morale during rest periods.

Chapter 2 - Duty

Chapter 2 - Duty Summary

Leonidas resumes the march, leading his warriors forward over the rocky terrain and through the hot day. His thoughts drift back to events of two weeks ago—events which shaped the current march. As prescribed by Spartan law, Leonidas had consulted the Spartan ephors prior to beginning a full-scale military expedition. The ephors live atop a craggy peak which emits powerful, trance-inducing fumes. Leonidas climbs the peak, meets the ephors, and makes a religious donation of heavy gold coin. He informs the ephors that the Persian army—rumored to number in the millions—is on the march and must be defeated by a combination of superior Spartan skill at arms and an intelligent selection of terrain; he suggests the entire Spartan army meet the Persians at a location known as the Hot Gates. But the ephors object—the Carneia, an important Spartan religious festival, is impending and surely no Spartan army will take to the field during the Carneia. Leonidas insists and the ephors determine to consult the oracle.

The oracle is a young girl, scantily clad in transparent clothes something like a diaphanous negligee. She swoons and writhes suggestively as she inhales the vapors ascending from a fissure in the mountain and then announces that Sparta will be destroyed—but the Carneia must be observed. The ephors are resolute—no Spartan army will march. Leonidas, over-ruled, leaves in disgust. He considers the ephors to be nothing more than perverse and decrepit old men, completely out of touch with Spartan realities. After Leonidas departs, a Persian infiltrator emerges from the shadows and showers gold coins upon the ephors, suggesting that their treasonous behavior will be richly rewarded by the Persian King Xerxes. The next morning Leonidas announces that he is going for a walk and plans to head north. His political advisors deduce what he is about, and his wife insists that such a putatively dangerous walk suggests that the King should be accompanied by his entire retinue of bodyguards. Thus, Leonidas is joined by his 300 picked warriors. His wife, the Queen, bids him farewell by instructing him to come back either with his shield or on his shield.

The march thus continues until the Spartans near the Hot Gates where they encounter another force of Arcadian Greeks led by Daxos, a friend of Leonidas. Daxos expresses dismay over how few soldiers Leonidas has brought. Rather than discuss internal Spartan politics, Leonidas counters by asking various Arcadians their profession. After they answer potter, sculptor, baker, etc., Leonidas states he has brought more soldiers than anyone. The force is then joined by other detachments of Greeks until it numbers about 7,000 strong. It is readily apparent that every other Greek commander immediately and voluntarily assumes an inferior command to Leonidas—the Spartan King is in command. Finally the combined force marches into Hell's Mouth and then to the Hot Gates. At the Hot Gates the Greeks watch as the pelting rain develops into a violent storm. They then see elements of the Persian fleet driven ashore and destroyed by the violent storm; the Greeks exult over the many broken Persian corpses which are



awash in the foamy sea. Leonidas watches the devastation and realizes the assembled Greeks still have no hope of surviving the Persian onslaught.

Chapter 2 - Duty Analysis

The Spartan government is led by a King—Leonidas—but he is in turn entirely politically subjected to the whim of a group of at least eight decrepit old men who hold the nebulous office of ephor—apparently a type of politico-religious station from whence there is no appeal. The ephors live atop a craggy prominence which steams with psychoactive vapors issuing from a crack in the rock. They keep a young girl as a sexual slave and she is apparently usually positioned near the vapors and lives in a perpetual state of erotic drugged trance (presumably, the oracle girl is replaced from time to time with a younger specimen). The ephors dress her voluptuous form in see-through lingerie and apparently engage her in sexual intercourse whenever they desire. The young girl, putatively the most-beautiful creature in Sparta, is the oracle and her appearance in a few panes is marked by her semi-nude and sexualized body writhing in various suggestive contortions. Her drug-induced pronouncements are considered the final word of law. The ephors and the oracle are apparently very concerned with the proper observance of religious rites. The ephors are also wholly corrupt and have betrayed Sparta for Persian gold. How the Spartan society, based entirely upon the total exclusion of individual initiative, has come to produce the corrupt and perverse ephors is not addressed in the text. Additionally, how the Spartan government based completely on military protocol has come to be completely dominated by arcane religious pronouncement is also not addressed. This unexplained bizarre inversion of values at the very pinnacle of Spartan life is the weakest element of the graphic novel.

Leonidas feels the ephors are disgusting, perverted, decrepit fools—but nevertheless keeps their council. Although prevented by the ephors from mobilizing the entire Spartan army, Leonidas is under no personal stricture to remain in Sparta. He therefore announces a casual walk north as if it were a commonplace thing. His wife understands what he intends to do and commands his personal bodyguard of 300 to accompany him; thus the title of the book is derived from the soldiers who die alongside Leonidas. The Queen's demand that Leonidas return with his shield or on his shield indicates that if he does not return with honor he should not return alive to disgrace her name. Leonidas and the queen obviously know his errand is fatal—thus her encouragement is meant to spur him to ultimate honor regardless of the cost. In a rare display of uncontrolled Spartan emotion, the queen turns away from a departing Leonidas to hide her tears.

During his frustrated visit to the ephors, Leonidas explains his overarching strategy and makes it clear that any victory over the Persians will rely heavily on proper use of terrain. He suggests the Hot Gates as the only logical location of the Spartan defense. An understanding of the text requires a basic grasp of Spartan military small unit tactics as well as an understanding of the terrain at the Hot Gates. The Spartan soldier was referred to as a hoplite and their success in battle depended on rigorous discipline within the ranks. Spartan hoplites stood side by side in long lines, each man's large

round shield providing cover to not only his own body but also to the man on his left. The heavy bronze shield wall was thus an interlocking barrier of armor. Through the small gaps created by the curvature of the interlocking shields the soldiers would thrust their heavy spears. Several lines of hoplites would then stand ranks deep to provide support to the front line. The enemy would thus face a nearly solid wall of bronze shields with numerous heavy spears protruding in staggered ranks. If the hoplite phalanx were breached, the results could be catastrophic—but the hoplite phalanx was rarely breached. For defense against arrow showers the secondary lines of hoplites would raise their shields overhead, providing an interlocking 'roof' of bronze armor.

The invading Persian army follows the only suitable path into Greece. The vast army needs incredible sources of fresh water—the Persian envoy mentions that the army has "...numbers so great it drinks the rivers dry" (p. 13)—and thus has to follow close to local rivers. It needs relatively flat terrain in which to maneuver and over which passes massed baggage and assault animals such as camels and elephants. Supply by sea requires the army to remain close to the coast. Because of all these constraints the only really suitable path is known to all, including Leonidas. The path, however, passes through one physical area known to the Greeks as the Hot Gates. At that point the plains are constricted by a massive rocky mountain range into a narrow gap, and the path passes through a vertical split in a cliff face and runs alongside a vertical drop into the sea, below. The Hot Gates are further defined by a rock wall which funnels the path even more directly into the yards-wide area. Leonidas realizes that a relative handful of Spartan hoplites could hold the Hot Gates against a much-larger invading force because the terrain's restrictive nature would render force size largely irrelevant. Thus, fighting at the Hot Gates will allow Spartan skill at arms to entirely prevail over Persian numeric superiority. The terrain of the Hot Gates is clearly illustrated in several panes but nowhere better than on pages 48 and 61.

The episode of young Leonidas fighting the wolf in a 'narrow wound' in a rock is obviously symbolic of the old King Leonidas fighting the Persians at the narrow gap called the Hot Gates. The text reinforces this imagery several times—both the wolf and the Persian army are said to anticipate the coming 'meal' of victory and as Leonidas faces his own certain death his last thoughts run back to the 'narrow wound' and the wolf. Unfortunately for Leonidas the Persian army will surround the 'narrow wound' of the Hot Gates and thus their mobility will guarantee their ultimate triumph. Also, just as Leonidas' initial victory over the wolf leads to his reign as king, so his final triumphant defeat at the Hot Gates will lead to his eternal reign as the archetypical Spartan hero. The symbolic similarity of the two events is otherwise obvious.

Chapter 3 - Glory

Chapter 3 - Glory Summary

The Spartans engage in a regime of extreme physical training while in camp—one pane illustrates Spartan soldiers doing one-armed pushups while officers stand on the soldiers' backs insulting their abilities. Apparently a few days pass with desultory skirmishing as the main Persian army approaches—at any rate the Spartans stack up a large body count of Persians. Then a Persian Ambassador travels toward the Greek camp, carried aloft on a palanquin and surrounded by soldiers. The Persian Ambassador worries about the disappearance of an earlier Persian scouting unit—then he sees the scouts butchered and impaled. Nevertheless he continues on and reaches the Spartan camp where he is ignored. As the Persian Ambassador utters dire pronouncements and demands, Dilios spins a tale about Spartan politeness while the Spartan soldiers engage in swimming and diving from a massive wall made of boulders and Persian corpses. Finally insulted beyond his better judgment, the Persian Ambassador attempts to lash Dilios but is prevented by Stelios who slashes off the Persian Ambassador's arm. The armless Persian Ambassador demonstrates considerable constitutional strength by then delivering a fairly lengthy ultimatum demanding unconditional and immediate surrender. The Spartans send him packing.

A misshapen hunchbacked man dressed in Spartan apparel then rushes across the countryside—this is Ephialtes. Spartan infants who show any deformity are routinely infanticides left exposed in the fields. Ephialtes, born a Spartan, escaped this fate because his mother refused to give him up and his father refused to abandon his mother. Thus, the family left Sparta behind and traveled north. Ephialtes' father has since died in great shame. Ephialtes has taken his father's clothing, armor, and weaponry, and has sought out the Spartan forces to render his assistance and thus reclaim the family honor. His approach alarms the Spartans who view his hulking and deformed body with suspicion. Leonidas allows Ephialtes an audience, however, and the two men walk and talk in private. Ephialtes tells his story of sadness and also mentions to Leonidas that there is a little-known goat path, high on the mountain, which circumvents the barrier of the Hot Gates. Ephialtes then informs Leonidas that under his father's training he has learned to fight like a Spartan. Leonidas asks for a meager demonstration and quickly notes that Ephialtes' deformity does not allow him to raise his shield to a suitable height. As the Greeks fight in a hoplite phalanx, their shields must interlock to provide cover. Ephialtes, therefore, cannot join the phalanx and Leonidas declines to accept him as a Spartan soldier. In a fit of despair Ephialtes flings himself into a precipice, an apparent suicide. Leonidas returns to camp and quickly dispatches the Phocian contingent to guard the old goat trail over the mountain. As the Phocians leave the ground begins to shake. Some men mistakenly believe the tremor to be an earthquake, but Leonidas recognizes it for what it really is—the vast bulk of the Persian army is on the march, and close. He signals for battle stations.

Chapter 3 - Glory Analysis

The Spartans and mixed Greek forces arrive at the Hot Gates and take possession of the terrain. They establish their basic strategy and send out defensive pickets. They engage forward elements of the Persian army with complete success. Random comments made by some soldiers suggest the Spartan hoplites are nearly exclusively responsible for military patrol while the remaining Greek forces provide manual labor—but this may be typical Spartan boasting. Leonidas particularly oversees the construction of a large rock wall which, curiously, has the corpses of Persian soldiers incorporated into it. This wall presumably complements another rock wall previously constructed—in any event, the walls are meant to further constrict the path through the Hot Gates by diverting passage over the cliff and into the sea, below.

The Persian Ambassador, obviously an important dignitary, delivers a surrender ultimatum to the Greek camp. That he is brave is obvious—he proceeds forward even after seeing his scouts butchered. That he is self-important is obvious—Dilios' spurn elicits great anger (not a useful emotion in the camp of the enemy). That he is particularly strong is obvious—he completes his mission even after losing an arm. Finally, that he is unsuccessful is obvious—the Spartans will never surrender. The vaunted Spartan military hierarchy appears to break down somewhat in the instance of the Persian Ambassador—no officers are present and the Persian Ambassador is sent packing by soldiers acting on their own initiative.

The seminal development in Chapter 3 concerns the quest for glory of the Spartan King Leonidas. Spartan culture is based primarily upon honor—the culmination of honorable conduct leads to glory. As Sparta is dominated by martial aspect so the culmination of honorable conduct must needs come through combat. Leonidas realizes, more than any other, that the impending combat will be met with formal honor and thus result in glory—personal glory, but more importantly glory for the Spartan state. The fact Leonidas is still lauded as an incomparable hero 2,500 years after his death establishes beyond doubt that his fundamental analysis was entirely correct.

The Spartan quest for glory is contrasted with Ephialtes' quest for personal, and hence family, honor. By Spartan standards, Ephialtes 'should have' been an infanticide. His misshapen form is unsuitable for phalanx combat and according to the martial mores of Sparta he is unusable as a citizen, therefore worthless as a man. His mother's emotional weakness prevented her from doing 'the right thing'; his father's moral cowardice prevented him from enforcing Spartan custom. Rather than expose their deformed infant son, Ephialtes' parents fled Sparta and became farmers. By modern standards they pursued an ethical and moral course—by the logic of Spartan culture they are traitors to the state. Ephialtes' assertion that he desires to become a loyal Spartan and that he has received sufficient military training is obviously not acceptable to Leonidas. Only a fool would accept a complete stranger into a defensive military camp on the eve of a major battle; even so, Leonidas apparently believes Ephialtes' story which is presented as factual within the narrative. Leonidas refuses Ephialtes' service because he cannot effectively mesh with a phalanx due to his deformity. While a

man like Leonidas does not lie neither will he soften the blow. The rejected Ephialtes attempts a despondent suicide.

Chapter 4 - Combat

Chapter 4 - Combat Summary

The Spartans defensive tactics center on the terrain of the Hot Gates. A massive cliff wall blocks the path for many, many miles, and only a narrow yards-wide gap at the base of the wall—the so-called Hot Gates—allows access to the Greek homeland beyond. The narrow trail is itself near a cliff which falls to the sea below. Thus, the Spartans must only defend a narrow strip of land against the Persian attack—the terrain renders the vast Persian numbers far less effective than otherwise would be the case. Nearby stone walls have been constructed which further restrict the Persians' movement and funnel their attacks into a confined and narrow place.

The Persian army engages the Spartans in combat at the Hot Gates. The Greeks form into a hoplite phalanx composed of lines of men, several deep, with overlapping shields locked together in a solid wall of bronze. From deep within the shield wall heavy bronze-tipped spears protrude in multiple regular rows. The Spartans' heads are shielded by heavy bronze helmets, and their iron-clad bravery ensures that no man will falter or flee. Conversely the first waves of Persian soldiers are little more than a rabble. They rush forward pell-mell and piecemeal, armed with light spears and protected by quilted armor and wicker shields, their heads wrapped in turbans. The Spartans slaughter the Persians as fast as they advance. The Persian initial assault is defeated. The Persians then fire showers of arrows upon the Spartans who take cover under massed shields. The second waves of Persians consist of men mounted on camels; the camels carry small howdahs and the riders within are armed with light lances. The camel-riders are surrounded by swarms of light foot infantry. None of the Persians have sufficient armoring and they attack pell-mell and piecemeal, as before. Leonidas realizes that even so the heavy camels assault could break through the phalanx by shock and press alone and he repositions the Spartans defense and orders them into a 'Delta' formation—a acute triangle. Leonidas takes the foremost point of the triangle, and the Spartans' shields form interlocking walls extending backwards toward the triangle's base. The camel-riders attack thus shatters against the point of the triangle and most are thus diverted and forced over the cliff and into the sea below. The Persian secondary assault is defeated. The Spartans spend the afternoon delivering massed coups de grace to the enemy wounded. They also execute the laborious task of piling the Persian corpses into a huge, blood-slippery, and unstable wall.

As the Spartans tend to their wounds and ready camp for nightfall, Stelios, assigned as a picket, rushes into camp and announces to Leonidas that the Persian King Xerxes approaches for an audience. Within moments a vast golden palanquin, carried by hundreds of slaves, approaches. On top of a giant throne stands Xerxes. He is heavily muscled, black, and effeminately attired in golden chains and jewels. He engages Leonidas directly in conversation, offering to make the Spartan king the absolute warlord of all Greece. Xerxes speaks of raising an army to smash Europe and beyond and says this will all be given Leonidas if he will only bow before the might of Xerxes.



Leonidas declines the offer, realizing that his last-stand efforts will make him eternally famous. Xerxes departs in a huff as Leonidas muses that Xerxes demonstrates hubris—excessive pride—and believes himself to be a god. Leonidas arranges a tactical maneuver and in passing refers to Stelios by his given name, restoring his honor among the men.

That night, as Leonidas has predicted, Xerxes' hubris leads him to commit a tactical blunder. Xerxes orders his personal bodyguard—the Immortals—into combat. The Immortals are Asia's finest fighting force and the only major contingent among the Persian army capable of potentially meeting the skill of the Spartans. Instead of saving the Immortals for the finishing action after wearing out the Spartans through days of combat, Xerxes' pride demands immediate results. As the Immortals close, Leonidas springs his trap—the Spartans push over the vast pile of slippery corpses stacked during the day and the avalanche of gore sweeps through the Immortals, breaking their ranks and throwing many of them into the sea. The remaining Immortals engage the Spartan phalanx and Leonidas springs his second trap—the Arcadian force led by Daxos has hidden among the crags and emerges behind the Immortals, flanking them and driving them into confusion. Within moments the force of the Immortals is shattered and soon enough they are all dead. Xerxes, watching from afar, becomes worried the Greeks may actually succeed. Leonidas, meanwhile, allows himself the indulgence of a small glimmer of hope. As the Spartans retire to camp and recoup their strength, the misshapen form of Ephialtes staggers to his feet—not dead from his leap, he has regained consciousness. Ephialtes staggers away bemoaning his unfortunate fate and angered by Leonidas' absolute rejection.

Chapter 4 - Combat Analysis

As the title suggest, Chapter 4 is dominated by combat. The artwork of this chapter is particularly interesting and violent. The presence of Leonidas can be discerned throughout by his crested helmet—the other Spartans wear a bronze-top helmet. It is therefore easy to determine that Leonidas is always at the forefront of combat. Panes of interest are many—pages 43-45 clearly illustrate the disciplined Spartan phalanx opposed by the pell-mell rabble of Persian light infantry. Page 46 illustrates Leonidas' terrain-specific defense working perfectly as several Persians are forced over a cliff and into the sea below. Page 47 illustrates the Spartans' ability to defend against arrow showers; in this event the arrows bear a variety of bizarre tips. The arrows impacting on the heavy bronze shields shatter while those impacting on the ground stand vertically—illustrated to great effect on page 48, etc. It is of historical note that archaeologists have unearthed the remains of the Persian arrow showers at the Hot Gates. The camel-rider cavalry charge is illustrated on pages 47-49; page 48 is particularly useful in depicting the general layout of the closely-restricted trail along the Hot Gates segment of terrain where the Spartans make their final stand. Leonidas's 'Delta' formation is used to divert the crush of the camel-riders' charge off the narrow pathway and into the sea, below. The camels illustrated include both dromedary and Bactrian camels. Subsequent to the defeat of the camel-rider charge, Leonidas immediately begins to plan tactically for the

next assault. Although his commands are rather cryptic—prepare the Arcadians, pile the corpses—their effectiveness becomes apparent shortly.

The discussion between Xerxes and Leonidas is interesting and provides deep characterization of both men. Xerxes believe he is a god but is apparently unable to fathom how Leonidas would prefer an honorable death to a dishonorable betrayal of Greece. Xerxes is huge and powerfully built but very foppish and effeminate. He is carried aloft on a giant palanquin by at least thirty slaves, his right eyebrow has two piercings, his left eyebrow three, his right nostril is pierced, his lower lip has two piercings, his chin has two piercings, his cheek has two piercings, and his ears have four piercings each—the twenty heavy gold hoops are laced together with various gold wires and meshes. He has ten visible piercings on his body and wears little more than a filigree of golden wires. His long nails appear gilded; his voice is described as "smooth as warm oil on well-worn leather—and deep as rolling thunder" (p. 51); he stands a full head taller than Spartan King. In all, Xerxes is an imposing figure but one in total contrast with the Spartan Leonidas. In short, Xerxes attempts to bribe Leonidas into betrayal by promising various appealing things—Leonidas refuses, preferring glory through combat. The very fact Xerxes personally makes such an appeal indicates he is simultaneously impressed and intrigued by Leonidas but also apparently dubious about his ability to achieve military success. In turn Leonidas correctly discerns that Xerxes' hubris will lead the Persian King into tactical blunders.

The assault by the Immortals on the first night is interesting—the imposing battalion is heavily armored and wields iron-tipped heavy spears. They do break ranks when approaching the wall of corpses, however, and they fail to discern Leonidas' trap. The flanking maneuver by the Arcadians is decisive and the illustration on page 55, showing the Immortals plunging into the sea and bisected by the Arcadian thrust, is instructive—at this point of the Hot Gates the Spartan hoplite phalanx is only five men and effectively about three men deep across but it blocks the entire trail. The Arcadian flanking assault consists of an apparent twenty-four men. Thus, about thirty disciplined warriors attack and decisively rout the entire body of the Immortals—not to mention the Persian army, said to number in the millions. Leonidas' combination of martial skill and optimal terrain is here proven undeniably. The panes on page 56 are exceptionally well crafted.

The final event of the chapter is the resuscitation of Ephialtes—not dead or even severely wounded, he regains consciousness and staggers away cursing the gods. He leaves behind his father's Spartan helmet in the final pane of page 57—symbolic of his abandonment of all Spartan dreams and ideals.

Chapter 5 - Victory

Chapter 5 - Victory Summary

At dawn of the second day of combat the Persian army again attacks. This time a vast rabble of lightly armed and armored soldiers is driven forward by the lashes of their officers. The inviolate Spartan hoplite phalanx slaughters them as quickly as they advance. As the attack collapses, Xerxes begins to execute his generals for incompetence. He then orders in an attack of elephants. The massive beasts bear huge howdahs which house numerous archers and men armed with lances. The seemingly indestructible beasts lumber forward onto the rocks of the Hot Gates which are covered with the slime of gore and blood. As the elephants take injury they recoil and thus lose their footing on the blood-slimed ground, the Spartans drive the elephants over the cliff and into the sea below with relative ease and few casualties. Victory over the Spartans appears unattainable. However, at this point Ephialtes enters the Persian camp.

Ephialtes is taken before Xerxes. His demands are obvious—land, wealth, women, and a soldier's uniform. Xerxes declares Ephialtes' dreams will all be met and indeed Ephialtes is immediately joined by two naked and beautiful women who strip the clothes from his misshapen and battered body. Ephialtes discloses the existence of the hidden goat path and in response to Xerxes' request leads a huge contingent of Persian soldiers to and over the pass until they reach the far side of the Hot Gates.

In the Greek camp Dilios bandages over an empty socket; he has lost an eye in the fighting but is prepared for another day of combat. He passes the time by telling the men the story of the battle of Marathon where another vast Persian army was slaughtered by victorious Greeks. Dilios' tale is interrupted by the appearance of a panicked Daxos—he yells that the Greeks are undone; the Persian army has crossed the hidden goat path and has scattered the unprepared Phocian guard after taking them by surprise. All of the various Greek soldiers immediately retreat from the area—except for the Spartans. They ready themselves for a final glorious last stand. Leonidas takes Dilios aside and demands he leave with the other Greeks. Dilios feels this a cruel blow of honor but Leonidas insists that a Spartan must bear the news of the Spartans' glorious defense—Dilios is the clear choice. The obedient storyteller sadly takes his leave and withdraws with the other Greeks as the Persian army surrounds the Hot Gates from both sides.

On the third day Ephialtes leads the Persian troops into Greek territory where they encounter a large contingent of retreating Thespians. Although a horrified Ephialtes objects, the Persians slaughter the Thespians to the man. Ephialtes decries the mass murder as needless and compares it to the earlier Persian attack on the scattering Phocian contingent, suggesting that many Phocians deserted rather than fight. Eventually Ephialtes leads the Persian forces up to the Spartan rear where, from a distance, he begs Leonidas to surrender to Xerxes. The Persian Ambassador again approaches Leonidas and demands immediate and unconditional surrender. Leonidas

does not answer but he does strip off his helmet and shield as he thinks of his battle with the wolf, forty years previous. The Persian Ambassador demands that Leonidas put down his spear. Leonidas then responds to Ephialtes, telling him he hopes Ephialtes will live forever. At a secret signal from Leonidas, Stelios then leaps forward and kills the Persian Ambassador. Leonidas, unencumbered by shield and helmet, then hurls his spear at the distant Xerxes. The spear impacts but with a glancing blow only, slashing open Xerxes' cheek. The entire Spartan contingent simultaneously assaults in both directions. A massive heavy assault ensues and the Persian archers send in a rain of arrows which indeed blots out the sun. Leonidas is pierced by dozens of arrows and dies amongst his dying men. Stelios is the last to die, also pierced by a dozen shafts.

Several months later Dilios sits in a camp of Spartans and spins the tale of Leonidas and his three hundred at the Hot Gates. He also recounts the recent Athenian decisive naval victory over the Persians at Salamis. Then he muses about the coming massive battle at the place they are encamped—Plataea. Dilios, accompanied now by ten thousand Spartans and twenty thousand other Greeks, predicts an easy victory against a mere thirty thousand Persian warriors. The graphic novel closes as the Spartan hoplites charge in formation toward the Persian army at Plataea.

Chapter 5 - Victory Analysis

Chapter 5, at twenty-two pages the longest in the text, begins with a problematic illustration of a heavy bronze Greek helmet. The slash through the left eye-socket indicates that the helmet is Leonidas'; but the helmet lacks the crest worn by the King. The second day of attack demonstrates the crumbling morale of the Persian army—the soldiers must be driven into combat by whips. This assault, too, evaporates into slaughter. Xerxes begins to execute his generals as even the elephant assault is shoved off the cliff and into the sea, below. The day then lapses into a strange lull and the night begins to pass uneventfully. The Persians are taking an alternative strategy, offered them by Ephialtes. As Xerxes promises land, wealth, women, and a uniform, Ephialtes betrays the Greeks by informing him of a way around the Hot Gates. The page 62 image of Ephialtes is interesting—he is flanked by voluptuous naked women but he stares outward at Xerxes. He also is naked but crouches down in humiliated defeat. The nudes which cavort about him are clanking with gold chains—the illustration is notable in that the various gold links appear strangely as series of zeroes and ones; the binary number system symbolizes the difference between Leonidas' glory and Ephialtes' betrayal and suggests a mathematical—or inexorable—progress toward destiny.

In the Spartan camp the incredible physical endurance of Leonidas' men is exhibited by Dilios. After two days of combat he has lost an eye. Far from incapacitated, he stands around the campfire and spins tales of Greek bravery. The good times are interrupted by Daxos' approach and notification that the Persians have crossed over the old goat path. Daxos and the thousands of other Greeks retreat from inevitable defeat—Leonidas and the Spartans remain to claim the glory of combat and the honor of their

destiny. This portrayal of events varies somewhat from historical fact—at Thermopylae some few Greeks from several cities remained with the Spartans.

By the third day Ephialtes had led the Persian army elements over the hidden goat path and circled of the Hot Gates. His statements indicate that the Phocian pass guard scattered instead of holding their post—presumably many survived. He is horrified when the Persian advance force of Immortals and archers encounters a detachment of Thespians and slaughters them to a man; clearly, Ephialtes has no experience with war. Pages 69-70 demonstrate interesting composition—alternating panes illustrating Leonidas' eyes and then what Leonidas sees out of his scarred helmet. The approaching Immortals are bolstered by numerous Persian archers on the heights. The redoubtable one-armed Persian Ambassador again approaches and demands unconditional surrender. Ephialtes, now dressed in a Persian uniform, pleads with Leonidas to accept the Persian terms of surrender. Finally, Xerxes approaches in the mistaken belief that, faced with annihilation, Leonidas will finally yield. All three men—Xerxes, the Persian Ambassador, and Ephialtes—have seriously misunderstood the Spartans from the beginning. The pleading expression of Ephialtes, the inquisitive expression of Xerxes, and the dazed expression of the Persian Ambassador all contrast markedly with the impassive stare of Leonidas delivered on page 71. The full-page 71 pane of the Spartan hoplite phalanx is impressive and illustrates wholly the formidable armor and weaponry of the heavy Greek phalanx. An estimated spear count of the pane suggests about thirty-five Spartan warriors became casualties during the previous days of fighting which cost the Persian army untold thousands of casualties. The early symbol of the wolf comes full-circle as Leonidas compares his current situation to his situation about forty years previous.

Leonidas strips his helmet and drops his shield so that he will be unencumbered for his planned spear attack on Xerxes. Leonidas throws his spear even as his Spartan soldiers are dying around him. His throw appears to be about fifty feet in distance and his impressive aim delivers the spear to Xerxes' face—the Persian King turns aside at the last moment and receives a slashed cheek. Leonidas then takes the unusual step of drawing his short sword—he is so quick that it has half-cleared the scabbard before his spear impacts Xerxes' face, stripping gold hoops out of the Persian King's lips. Within seconds Leonidas is pierced by as many as two dozen arrows and he dies—an immortal hero—thinking of his wife, knowing he has maintained his honor and gained eternal glory through unyielding combat. The last Spartan to die is apparently Stelios; as he commented on page 36, Stelios does indeed briefly fight in the shade of volleys of arrows. Like Leonidas, Stelios is reduced to using his short sword in the last few seconds of his life. The full-page 79 pane shows Leonidas encircled by his slain heroes; the ground full of Persian arrows.

The final two pages of the graphic novel bring the timeline into the 'current' principle timeline of the text. Dilios, now a captain, leads many Spartan warriors and encourages them by telling the story of Leonidas and his 300; now one year old, the story already inspires. The final full-page 81 pane shows another Spartan hoplite phalanx charging over rocky ground toward ultimate victory over the Persian invaders at Plataea.

Characters

Leonidas

Leonidas is the protagonist and dominant character of the graphic novel. He is a perfect physical specimen and has dedicated his life to the unqualified pursuit of martial skill at arms. He generally appears armed and armored and wears a heavy bronze helmet with a jagged slash cut through one eye and a stiff horsehair plume on the top. Otherwise, he is as any normal Spartan soldier. At the age of about ten, Leonidas underwent an initiation rite by leaving Sparta and wandering in the wilderness during the winter months. He crafted a light spear and then was stalked by a huge wolf. Using a stratagem, he lured the wolf into a narrow fissure in a rock, thus robbing it of mobility. He then killed the wolf and returned to Sparta a man. At some point in the next years he became King of Sparta and married. If he has children, they are not discussed in the text.

When Leonidas was about 49 years of age Sparta was visited by a Persian Envoy who represented the distant Persian King Xerxes. The Persian Envoy demanded Spartan soil and water as a token of Sparta's submission to the Persian King. Leonidas not only refused, he put the Persian Envoy and his entourage to death. The next year the Persian King Xerxes led a massive Persian army into Greece to subjugate the proud city states. Leonidas intended to lead the entire Spartan army to oppose the Persians but was thwarted by the decree of the corrupt ephors. Instead, Leonidas led his 300 personal guards to the Hot Gates. There he assumed command of several thousand assembled Greek soldiers and led a desperate defense against the invading hordes. Eventually betrayed, Leonidas refused to leave his position and was surrounded and subsequently killed by the Persian forces.

Stelios ('Stumblios')

Stelios is a young Spartan soldier, one of 300 men Leonidas picks to defend the pass at the Hot Gates. He is named, unlike most of the other soldiers in the phalanx, and can be seen as a type of representative character. During the grueling forced march from Sparta to the Hot Gates, Stelios succumbs momentarily to the heat and stumbles—earning the nickname of 'Stumblios'. He accepts his punishment for faltering and continues the march. In the Spartan camp he distinguishes himself by attacking the Persian Ambassador, striking off that man's arm before refusing the Persian's demand for surrender. Later, Stelios informs Leonidas that Xerxes is approaching and pledges his allegiance to the Spartan King and cause. Stelios is apparently the last Spartan to die in the defense of the Hot Gates, his body pierced by dozens of Persian arrows.

Dilios

Dilios is an older Spartan soldier, one of 300 men Leonidas picks to defend the pass at the Hot Gates. He is named, like Stelios, but is more than a representative type of character. Dilios is a storyteller and regales the troops every evening with stories about Spartan courage, military prowess, and social courtesy. During the defense of the Hot Gates, Dilios receives a fairly severe wound, losing an eye. Undaunted, he bandages up his face and then spends the evening telling stories to the tired soldiers. Dilios fully intends to remain at the Hot Gates and die alongside Leonidas and the other men, but is prevented from doing so by Leonidas' request. The Spartan King asks Dilios to forego personal glory and honor so that the gallant Spartan defense at the Hot Gates can be told to the wider world. Thus, Dilios leaves the pass with the Arcadians and travels back to Sparta with the news that the Persian King Xerxes has killed the Spartan King Leonidas. Dilios' news galvanizes Sparta and about one year later the entire Spartan army faces the Persian army at Plataea. By this time Dilios is a captain, probably due to his signal service at the Hot Gates. He is the only survivor of the contingent of 300 Spartans.

King Xerxes

Xerxes, the Persian King and principle antagonist of the graphic novel, is a huge and powerfully built but very foppish and effeminate man. He is usually carried aloft on a giant palanquin by at least thirty slaves. Xerxes wears an enormous weight of jewelry—his right eyebrow has two piercings, his left eyebrow three, his right nostril is pierced, his lower lip has two piercings, his chin has two piercings, his cheek has two piercings, and his ears have four piercings each—the twenty heavy gold hoops are laced together with various gold wires and meshes. He has ten visible piercings on his body and wears little more than a filigree of golden wires and diaphanous black veils. His long nails appear gilded and his voice is described as "smooth as warm oil on well-worn leather—and deep as rolling thunder" (p. 51); he stands a full head taller than Spartan King, a large man in his own right.

Xerxes intends to lead the Persian army into Greece and completely devastate the country. To this end he has assembled an army rumored to number in the millions. His forces include vast numbers of light infantry and archers, as well as a sizeable contingent of heavy infantry known as the Immortals. The army also includes camel-riders and elephants. Xerxes believes himself to be a god and is sure any man can be bribed into treacherous betrayal—he therefore repetitively makes bribes and offers to Leonidas in a vain attempt to secure the Spartan King's allegiance. Xerxes has never met Spartans, however, and is thwarted by them politically, militarily, and, finally, personally. Although eventually victorious at the Hot Gates, Xerxes' army is too damaged to continue aggressively. A few months later, the Athenian navy delivers a crushing defeat to Xerxes' navy at Salamis, and a few months after that Xerxes's remaining forces are nearly annihilated at Plataea.



The Persian Envoy

The Persian Envoy is the first Persian character to appear in the graphic novel. Like most Persians, he wears an excessive amount of gold facial jewelry and talks to the Spartans as if they were provincial idiots. He enters Sparta with an entourage and demands a tribute of soil and water as a symbol of subjugation to the distant Persian King Xerxes. Leonidas comments that the Persian Envoy had been previously rebuked in Athens. The Persian Envoy, seriously misunderstanding Spartan culture, is demeaning, arrogant, and insulting. Leonidas rewards the Persian Envoy by casting him to his death in a deep well and then slaughtering his entourage. The wisdom of polluting the town well with a foreign corpse is dubious—but dramatic.

The Persian Ambassador

The Persian Ambassador is, similar to the Persian Envoy, a representative of Xerxes. The Persian Ambassador is apparently high rank as he wears a distinct uniform. He is brave—he advances to the Greek camp after finding his scouts slaughtered and impaled. He is also notably resilient to damage, as he delivers a lengthy message after having an arm severed and, just a few hours later, again appears attired and ready for action. He is nevertheless arrogant and demanding and misunderstands Spartan character. The Persian Ambassador delivers several ultimatums to Leonidas and is repeatedly ignored. Unlike the unfortunate Persian Envoy, however, the Persian Ambassador survives his encounter with the Spartans.

Daxos the Arcadian

Daxos is the leader of a relatively small force of Arcadians, numbering perhaps a few hundred. The Arcadians, citizen-soldiers, have traveled to the Hot Gates to defend Greece from the invading Persian army. Daxos and Leonidas are acquainted and appear to share some level of respect; though in all things military, both men realize Leonidas' superiority. During the fighting at the Hot Gates, Daxos leads a contingent of Arcadians on a dangerous but glorious ambush which takes the Persian Immortals by surprise and flanks them. Daxos' Arcadians divide the Immortals' force and then, combined with the Spartans, drive the Immortals over a cliff and into the sea. Later, Daxos rides into camp on a horse, sounding the alarm that the Persian army has surrounded the Hot Gates. When Daxos learns that Leonidas intends to stay, he briefly argues with the Spartan before retreating in shame. Although a brave man, Daxos will live to fight another day.

Ephialtes

Ephialtes' parents were Spartans. When he was born, however, Ephialtes was severely deformed—primarily a hunchback, he suffers from various other deformities. The Spartan customary practice was to favor infanticide by exposure. Ephialtes' mother



refused to abandon her infant and his father refused to abandon his wife. Thus, the entire family left Sparta, traveled north, and became farmers. Ephialtes' father raised him with Spartan military training. When the Persian army approaches, Ephialtes rushes to the defense of Greece and offers himself to Leonidas as a Spartan soldier. Leonidas declines the offer, noting that Ephialtes' deformities prevent him from raising his shield to a suitable height to form part of a phalanx defense. Ephialtes then throws himself from a cliff in a suicide attempt.

Ephialtes regains consciousness and despairs. The battle has proved the Spartan defense tenable and the Persian army has come to a standstill. Ephialtes then betrays Greece in a bid to regain a semblance of honor and manhood. In exchange for the usual items of land, wealth, and women, Ephialtes shows the Persians the hidden goat path that allows them to encircle the Hot Gates. He displays a remarkably naïve outlook when the Persians massacre the retreating Greeks. Later, he compounds his error by appearing in Persian uniform and pleading with Leonidas to surrender. The Spartan King responds with a Spartan curse—"You there. Ephialtes. May you live forever," (p. 73). Ephialtes' ultimate fate is interesting to ponder.

The 300

The 300 Spartans which accompany Leonidas on his fated march to the Hot Gates form a heroic company of honor-bound soldiers. A Spartan soldier was referred to as a hoplite and their success in battle depended on rigorous discipline within the ranks. Spartan hoplites stood side by side in long lines, each man's large round shield providing cover to not only his own body but also to the man on his left. The heavy bronze shield wall was thus an interlocking barrier of armor. Through the small gaps created by the curvature of the interlocking shields the soldiers would thrust their heavy spears. Several lines of hoplites would then stand ranks deep to provide support to the front line. The enemy would thus face a nearly solid wall of bronze shields with numerous heavy spears protruding in staggered ranks. If the hoplite phalanx were breached, the results could be catastrophic—but the hoplite phalanx was rarely breached. For defense against arrow showers, the secondary lines of hoplites would raise their shields overhead, providing an interlocking 'roof' of bronze armor. Leonidas's 300 hoplites include Stelios, Dilios, and the captain—other soldiers are not named.

The Captain

The Spartan 300 are normally commanded by a captain, the only named-rank officer in the text aside from the King. The captain is presented as a formidable and entirely competent soldier who is somewhat short on intuition. His son is one of the soldiers killed fairly early in the fighting at the Hot Gates. The captain dies in the final onslaught of the Immortals.

Objects/Places

Sparta

A city and city state in ancient Greece, located in an area referred to in the graphic novel as Lakonia. Within the text, Sparta has given rise to a wholly militaristic society where men are highly-disciplined soldiers and women are stern, devoted, and focused on honor. All aspects of Spartan society are devoted to militaristic honor and glory through combat.

Arcadia

A city and city state in Ancient Greece, located in an area fairly close to the Hot Gates. Within the text, Arcadia is not particularly described but is the home city of a body of Arcadian soldiers who join with Leonidas in defense of the Hot Gates. The Arcadian citizen-soldiers acquit themselves very well in combat, though they are clearly not the equals of the Spartans.

Athens

A city and city state in Ancient Greece, located near the Hot Gates. Within the text, Athens is not described but is referred to several times with the insinuation that it is the seat of democracy and the arts. Leonidas refers to Athenians as "boy-lovers" and insinuates that their military prowess is not particularly impressive. The Athenians are, however, the undisputed masters of naval combat. Dilios refers to two major military actions involving Athenians—the first is the land-battle of Marathon where Athenian citizen-soldiers decisively defeat the Persian army; the second is the sea-battle of Salamis where the Athenian navy decisively defeat the Persian navy. Historically, Athens was the traditional rival of Sparta.

Persia

A vast empire to the East of Greece, Persia attempted on several occasions to conquer the various Greek city states. Conflict between Persia and Greece was nearly constant for over one hundred years. Even though Persia was far larger and far richer, the Persian kings never managed to decisively defeat the various Greeks in combat. In the graphic novel, Persia is the invading nation which threatens to snuff out Greek democracy and replace it with despotic rule. The Persians are portrayed as generally corrupting, perverse, and often effeminate.



The Wolf and the Narrow Wound in the Rock

When a boy, Leonidas defeats a huge wolf by stratagem, leading it into a narrow fissure in a rock where it loses mobility and is easily killed. The story is recounted by Dilios and forms an obvious symbolic link between Leonidas' life as a young man and his defense of the Hot Gates.

The Ephors and the Oracle

Sparta is ruled by a King but the Spartan King is in turn ruled by the ephors; though not historically accurate, the graphic novel portrays the ephors as decrepit old men full of greed and lust. In the text, the ephors—at least eight in number—live atop a craggy prominence and keep the most-beautiful young Spartan girl as a sexual slave. Her duties also include oracular pronouncements and to this end she is kept near a fissure in a rock which emits psychedelic fumes. It is indeed bizarre that the honorable and rigid Spartan society is dominated so wholly by obviously corrupt and perverted ancient men.

The Carneia

The Carneia is a religious festival in ancient Sparta. The festival is apparently of major significance and custom forbids Sparta from fielding an army during the Carneia. The nature and purpose of the festival are not discussed in the text; it is simply used as a pretext by the corrupt ephors to prevent Leonidas from mobilizing the Spartan army.

Tegea, Mantinea, Thespieae, Thebes, Opus, Phocis, Malis

These locations are the names of various Greek cities and city states which contribute forces to the defense of the Hot Gates, together with Arcadia and of course Sparta. Tegea, Mantinea, Thebes, Opus, and Malis are mentioned only in passing. The Phocians are ordered to guard a hidden goat pass; instead they apparently lay about and are taken by surprise and scattered by the Persian army. The Thespian contingent is slaughtered to a man as they retreat from the Hot Gates.

Hell's Mouth or The Hot Gates

The invading Persian army followed the only suitable path into Greece. The vast army needed incredible sources of fresh water and thus had to follow close to local rivers. It needed relatively flat terrain in which to maneuver and over which passed massed baggage and assault animals such as camels and elephants. Supply by sea required the army to remain close to the coast. All these constraints dictated the only really suitable path was known to all, including Leonidas. The path, however, passed through one physical area known to the Greeks as the Hot Gates. At that point the plains were

constricted by a massive rocky mountain range into a narrow gap, and the path passed through a vertical split in a cliff face and ran alongside a vertical drop into the sea, below. The Hot Gates were further defined by a rock wall which funneled the path even more directly into the yards-wide area. Leonidas realized a relative handful of Spartan hoplites could hold the Hot Gates against a much-larger invading force because the terrain's restrictive nature would render force size largely irrelevant. Thus, fighting at the Hot Gates would allow Spartan skill at arms to entirely prevail over Persian numeric superiority. The terrain of the Hot Gates is clearly illustrated in several panes but nowhere better than on pages 48 and 61. The Hot Gates, or Thermopylae, is today much wider due to erosion and spans several hundred yards of open, flat terrain.

The Hidden Goat Path

The mountains which form a barrier pierced only by the Hot Gates have a little-known hidden goat path which leads over and through them. The traitor Ephialtes shows the hidden goat path to the Persian King Xerxes in exchange for worldly rewards. Elements of the Persian army travel over the hidden goat path and encircle the Spartans at the Hot Gates, thus gaining the ultimate tactical victory.

Themes

Honor and Duty

The first established theme within the graphic novel centers on societal honor and duty with a particular focus on Spartan society. Honor is the ultimate goal of every Spartan and their lifestyle is entirely devoted to honorable behavior and practices—they care nothing for money, power, or the soft life. Each individual Spartan maintains personal honor by rigorously complying with Spartan law and custom. Spartans who do not so conform—for example, Ephialtes' parents—are ostracized or leave voluntarily. Even interpersonal relationships are entirely subjugated to the notion of honor. For example, Leonidas' wife instructs him as he leaves that she expects him to return with his shield or on his shield; that is, return with honor or return dead. It follows that personal honor leads to group honor, and group honor leads to societal honor. An honorable society, perpetuated through time, will persist.

Personal honor is established and maintained through an observation of personal duty. A Spartan soldier, for example, must be entirely subservient to his superior officer. This is perhaps best illustrated by an exchange between Stelios and Leonidas at the Hot Gates. After Leonidas states that the Spartans will remain, defend, and die, Stelios voices his consent. What to a more common leader might be encouraging words is to Leonidas patronizing, and he replies "I didn't ask. Leave democracy to the Athenians, boy," (p. 64). It is Stelios' duty to obey unquestioningly, even at the expense of his life, and only through the observation of this duty is Stelios capable of maintaining his honor. Likewise, when Leonidas commands Dilios to leave the Hot Gates he complies. Dilios thus has the singular distinction of being honorably absent from combat through observation of his duty.

Glory and Combat

Although honor and duty are sufficient for any Spartan soldier, they are not all that can be hoped for. Spartan culture is entirely given over to militaristic pursuits. Their martial culture demands every man be instantly ready for violent combat. Their soldiers shrug off grievous injury like a typical man might shrug off a stubbed toe. Dilios, for example, loses an eye in combat and a few hours later stands about the campfire relating stories of ancient heroics. Thus, a Spartan trains his entire life for a single purpose—combat. Spartans do not fear combat; in fact, they desire it as the flowering of their very purpose. When the Spartans meet the Arcadians, they compare themselves. The Arcadians describe themselves as bakers, sculptors, and men of various trades. The Spartans describe themselves as soldiers. Tools crafted for a particular purpose must be utilized for that purpose to justify their crafting—Spartans must fight to justify their society.



The realization of purpose through combat can, in special situations, lead to the ultimate Spartan culmination of glory. For a Spartan, combat is exhilarating and victorious achievement is fulfilling. However, simple victory does not yield glory. Only exceptional conduct in extenuating circumstances can bring the full spotlight glare of glory, and the Spartan defense until the death of the Hot Gates is one such confluence. While the other Greeks retreat home, the Spartans remain. Convinced they face hopeless odds, they are determined to retain their honor, execute their duty, die in combat, and thus achieve eternal glory. Twenty-five centuries of time have completely validated their choice, and Leonidas and his 300 remain today among the most-glorious combatants to ever wield a sword in defense of their country.

Victory

The graphic novel's theme of victory is complicated. Upon the surface, Xerxes proves victorious over Leonidas. The Spartan contingent is slaughtered to the last man; the various Greek contingents from other cities are decimated and scattered; and Persian troops gain the Hot Gates. Greece lays wide open before Xerxes' assault—true, the price paid has been dear, but tactical victory has been achieved. However, the theme of victory is more subtle than surface appearance. The true victors at the Hot Gates are indeed the Spartans; their memory spans through the millennia because of their honorable and glorious last stand in defense of their culture and nation. Leonidas' sacrifice assures him a place in the pantheon of the Greek heroes and his life is expended to insure that no amount of corrupting Persian gold will ever again interfere with Sparta's militaristic honor and duty.

The theme of victory is further developed by Dilios and the unnamed narrator. Various victories—both tactical and strategic—include Leonidas' boyhood defeat of a wolf; Leonidas' moral victory over the ephors as he leads his 300 into combat; the astounding Athenian victory over the Persians at Marathon; the Athenian decisive naval victory over the Persians at Salamis; and the inevitable Greek decisive victory over the Persians at Plataea. Joined to the stunning moral victory of the Spartans at the Hot Gates, the theme of victory becomes central to any reading of the graphic novel.

Style

Point of View

The graphic novel is told from the difficult first-person, plural, point of view. The first sentence begins "We march..." and the last sentence ends "...we charge." The narrator is unnamed, but reliable, and knows the interior thoughts and motivations of all characters. Identifying an individual as the narrator is problematic because most of the events narrated leave no survivor other than Dilios who is spoken of often as a character; he is clearly not the narrator. Although the graphic novel's timeline spans a period of forty-one years, the narrator is not necessarily there for more than one year. This is because the experiences of c. 520 BC are related in a flashback sequence by Dilios and then later contemplated in a series of flashback sequences by Leonidas. In any event, it is probably not significant that the narrator cannot be individually identified—the narrator is probably best understood as the collective voice of the Spartan soldiers.

Within the text, Dilios operates as a meta-narrator, spinning tales about past events and bolstering the other soldiers' morale with bravado and stories of glory. Dilios, too, often speaks in the first-person, plural, voice. This combination of narrator and meta-narrator plays well in the Greek tradition of oral histories and epic adventure. The unusual point of view works particularly well in the graphic novel format, where the reader is privy to intimate details of individuals and has a 'bird's-eye' view of all significant events.

Setting

The setting is dominated by geography and historic events. The bulk of the narrative occurs at a specific location in ancient Greece referred to as the Hot Gates. Known historically as Thermopylae, the Hot Gates were indeed the historic site of a significant battle between the Greeks and the Persians. This terrain feature funneled the wide open plains into a single narrow pass which restricted the vast Persian army's mobility, effectively allowing a limited number of highly-skilled Spartan warriors to exclude the vast Persian army from entering into the Greek homeland. The setting of the Hot Gates is first described by Leonidas to the ephors and, later, is graphically illustrated in considerable detail. An addition, final view of the blood-soaked Hot Gates, devoid of living men, is offered in the text's final binding page.

The setting of the Hot Gates is mirrored in an early wilderness setting described by Dilios. The storyteller tells of a young boy who was pursued by a ravenous wolf. He lured the wolf into a narrow fissure, or wound, in a rock. The wolf pursued the boy until it became stuck in the narrowing gap. Deprived of mobility, the wolf was then easily killed. The parallels between the narrow fissure and the Hot Gates are many and rich in texture. Secondary settings include the city of Sparta and the temple area of the ephors and oracle, although these are secondary in importance.

Language and Meaning

The text of the graphic novel is presented in terse English. Text is either encapsulated in square boxes, indicating narration by the unnamed and omniscient narrator, or encapsulated in traditional 'comic book' speech bubbles, indicating dialogue between various characters. An array of graphic elements is used to emphasize individual words to pattern the text after speech patterns. The most common element is bold face type, but other graphics are also used. For example, pages 74 and 75 bear Leonidas' shout of "Xerxes—die!" in enormous red letters. In general, the language used is simple, obvious, and contributes materially to the graphic novel's accessibility. The Persians and various Greek citizens can all communicate easily and thus any subtlety or complexity arising from real-world linguistic situations is ignored by convention.

Meaning within the graphic novel is more complicated. The meaning must be extracted not only from narrative statement and dialogue but, more importantly, from the artwork. A good example of this is found on page 74 in the panes that illustrate the captain's wild-eyed frenzy following the death of his son. The dry narrative statement "It takes three men to restrain him" does not—indeed cannot—convey the meaning of intense emotion present in the artwork.

Structure

The 81-page graphic novel is divided into five enumerated and named chapters which contain between 14 and 21 pages each. Pages are composed sometimes of a single pane of art but are more-frequently composed of multiple panes. Inset panes are common but artwork that crosses pane borders is nearly non-existent. Graphic depiction of violent battle is commonplace and severed limbs, murder, and impaled corpses litter the pages. The graphic novel is about a battle to the death, and the illustrator pulls no punches in depicting mass slaughter. In general, the characters depicted are military men focused on warfare. Frontal male nudity is fairly common—the Spartans, in particular, are often nude—but male genitalia are not drawn with detail. Female forms within the text are fairly rare but are nearly always presented in a highly sexualized and partially nude pose. The exception to this is the Spartan queen who flaunts apparent Spartan fashion by covering her breasts. The artwork throughout is exceptional and sets a definite gritty tone and texture which would not be possible in a more-traditional novel format. All artwork is presented in full-color though night scenes are other low-light conditions are frequently depicted with muted, nearly black and white, renderings. Panoramic battle scenes are usually presented in earth-tone renderings. Terrain scenes receive particular emphasis of detail as do the text-free battle panes on page 56, illustrated with exceptional skill. In brief, the graphic novel format and structure are particularly well-suited to the rendering of this exciting story and are executed in a way which makes the fictionalized historic events particularly accessible and enjoyable.

Quotes

"He was cold, the boy was cold. Hungry. It was his initiation. His time in the wild. He would return as a Spartan—or not at all. He had wandered far from Sparta. Far from home. He'd survived on roots and bugs and rodents—and now he was freezing to death. He heard a low growl. Cold. Hungry. Far from home. Defenseless. Defenseless. The scrawny stick he's sharpened—it was nothing. A joke. A child's toy masquerading as a proper spear. He was defenseless. He was prey. The beast circled, sniffing, savoring the scent of the meal to come. Did the boy run? Did he cower? Did he cry? No! Not this boy. He showed the wolf his backside. He was calm. Not a trace of fear did he show. The wind screamed through a narrow wound in the rock. Too late, the beast charged—and howled, thrashing, trapped—pinned by the unforgiving rock. The boy raised his stick. His hands were steady. His form was perfect. And so the boy, given up for dead—returned a king. Our king! Leonidas!" (pp. 8-10)

"[Leonidas:] 'Earth and water? You rode all the way from Persia for earth and water?'

"[Persian Envoy:] 'Don't be coy. Don't be stupid. You can afford neither. A force of men is assembled—so massive it shakes the earth with its march—its numbers so great it drinks the rivers dry. All the God-King requires is a modest offering—of earth and water—a simple token of Sparta's submission to the will of Xerxes.'

"[Leonidas:] 'Hm. That's a bit of a problem. Rumor has it the Athenians have already turned you down. And if those boy-lovers found that kind of nerve...after all, we Spartans have our reputation to consider. Still, I'd hate to be rude. There's got to be a diplomatic way to handle this.'

"[Persian Envoy:] 'Choose your next words carefully.'

"[Leonidas:] 'Of course, it's obvious. The answer's right in front of me.'" (p. 13)

"[Leonidas:] 'The Persians claim their forces number in the millions. Surely they exaggerate—but there's no question that we will face the most massive army ever assembled. We will use our superior fighting skill—and the terrain of Greece herself—to destroy them. We will march north. To the coast.'

"[Ephor:] 'It is August. The full moon approaches.'

"[Ephor:] 'The Carneia. The sacred festival of the Carneia. Sparta wages no war at the time of the Carneia.'

"[Leonidas:] 'The festival will be our last—unless you allow me my plan. Hear me out. We will block the Persians' coastal march with a great stone wall—funneling them into the mountain pass we call the Hot Gates. In that narrow corridor, their numbers will count for nothing. Like an angry sea heaving wave after wave against an unyielding cliff, they will shatter at each advance. Xerxes losses will be so great—his men so demoralized—he will have no choice but to abandon his campaign.'

"[Ephor:] 'But—the Carneia...we must consult the oracle.'" (pp. 19-20)

"[Oracle:] 'Pray to the winds. Sparta will fall. All Greece will fall. Trust not in men. Honor the old gods. Honor the Carneia.'" (p. 21)



"[Stelios:] 'Run back to your master. Tell him he faces free men—not slaves.'

"[Persian Ambassador:] 'Not slaves, no. Your women will be our slaves. Your sons and daughters and brothers and elders will be slaves. But not you. By this noon—you will be dead men! One hundred nations descend upon you! Our arrows will blot out the sun!'

"[Stelios:] 'Then we'll fight in the shade.'" (p. 36)

"[Leonidas:] 'Dispatch the Phocians to that goat path—and pray to the gods that nobody tells the Persians about it. Whuff!'

"[The Captain:] 'Earthquake!'

"[Leonidas:] 'No captain, that's no earthquake! Battle stations!'

"A beast approaches—savoring the meal to come. A force of men—so massive it shakes the earth with its march. An army—vast beyond imagining—poised to devour tiny Greece—to snuff out the world's one hope for reason and justice." (p. 39)

"A voice as smooth as warm oil on well-worn leather—and as deep as rolling thunder."

"[Xerxes:] 'Leonidas. Let us reason together. It would be a regrettable waste—it would be nothing short of madness—were you and your valiant troops to perish, all because of a simple, avoidable misunderstanding.'

"[Leonidas:] 'Don't lose sleep worrying over us. We're having the time of our lives.'

"[Xerxes:] 'Brave words, Spartan words. Yours is a fascinating tribe. There is much our cultures could share.'

"[Leonidas:] 'We've been sharing our culture with you all morning.'

"[Xerxes:] 'Enough sarcasm. You Greeks take pride in your logic. I suggest you employ it. Consider the beautiful land you so vigorously defend. Picture it reduced to ash. Consider the fate of your women.'

"[Leonidas:] 'You don't know our women. I might as well have marched them here, judging by what I've seen. You have man men, Xerxes—but few soldiers. And it won't be long before they fear my spears more than your whips.'

"[Xerxes:] 'It's not the lash they fear. It is my divine power. But I am a generous god. I can make you rich beyond all measure. I can make you warlord of all Greece, carrying my battle standard to the heart of Europe. Your Athenian rivals will kneel at your feet—if you but kneel at mine.'

"[Leonidas:] 'That's quite an offer. I'd be crazy to refuse it. But this kneeling business—I'm afraid killing all those slaves of ours has left me with a nasty cramp in my leg. I think I'll walk it off.'

"[Xerxes:] 'You sadden me. As I am generous so am I wrathful. I will erase even the memory of Sparta from the histories. There will be no glory in your sacrifice. No one will ever know.'

"[Leonidas:] 'They'll know. Watch your back. Your men look nervous.' (p. 51)

"Wordless—their form faultless—moving in such perfect unison that each collective step strikes the earth like a blow from the fire god's hammer—they march. The personal guard to King Xerxes. The Persian warrior elite. The deadliest fighting force in all Asia. The Immortals. Now, while we are fresh and at our full strength—before wounds and



weariness have taken their toll—the mad king throws the best he has at us.

"[Leonidas:] 'SPARTANS... PUSH.'

"Xerxes has taken the bait. And now the trap is sprung. The Immortals. We put their name to the test. It's slippery work." (pp. 53-54)

"[Dilios:] 'Xerxes repeats his father's folly. Ten summers past, Persian slaves set shore at the plain of Marathon, there to face brave Greeks—and our mightiest ally, the harsh, proud terrain of Greece herself. The Persians stumbled from their crowded ships, their legs cramped, their soft feet recoiling from the rocky soil, the snapping, stabbing, thorny underbrush. They looked up—jaws slack, hearts lurching up their throats. Armored men charged at them—at a full run—from a full mile distant. Armored men—Athenians. With their leather skirts and lovingly sculpted breastplates. What a pretty pack they must have been. Athenians. Amateurs. Foppish, frilly citizen soldiers. Not a Spartan among them—and still they drove the Persians back to the sea and away! Brothers! How can we fail—against foes so fearful of combat they'd show their backsides to Athenians?'" (p. 62)

"The old ones claim we Spartans descend from Herakles himself. Bold Leonidas gives testament to our bloodline. His roar is long and loud and full of laughter. Staring death square in the eye—he laughs." (p. 75)

"Should any free soul come across this place—in all the countless centuries to be—may our voices whisper to you from the ageless stones. Go tell the Spartans, passerby: that here by Spartan law, we lie." (p. 79)

"[Dilios:] 'And so my king died. And so my brothers died. Barely a year ago. Long I pondered my king's cryptic talk of victory. And time proved him wise. From free Greek to free Greek spread the word—that bold Leonidas and his three hundred, so far from home, laid down their lives. Not just for Sparta, but for all Greece—and the promise our country holds. Our country, our nation, inspired now, united—setting aside past rivalries, joining forces to drive the invader from our shores. From our shores—and from our seas.'

"Captain Dilios spins his stories. His best story. The one about the Hot Gates. The Hot Gates—and beyond.

"[Dilios:] 'In the waters of Salamis, Athenian seafaring mastery led the united Greek navy to shatter the Persian armada! And now—here—on this rocky ragged patch of Greece we call Plataea—Xerxes hordes face obliteration! The barbarians huddle, sheer terror gripping tight their hearts with icy fingers, knowing what they suffered at the spears and swords of the three hundred. They stare across this plain at ten thousand Spartans—commanding thirty thousand free Greeks! The enemy outnumber us a paltry three to one. Good odds for any Greek. This day, we rescue a world from the old, dark, stupid ways—and we usher in a future that is surely brighter than any we can imagine. Give thanks, men, to Leonidas and his brave three hundred—and ready yourselves for war!'

"The order is given. The battle flutes play. To victory—we charge." (pp. 80-81)

Topics for Discussion

The end binding pages in the graphic novel obviously portray the blood-soaked Hot Gates after the final Spartan defeat. What do you think the front binding pages are meant to portray?

As a young boy, Leonidas leads a wolf into a narrow fissure in a rock to gain an advantage. As a King, Leonidas leads the Persian army into the Hot Gates to gain an advantage. Compare and contrast these two events.

On page 11, the Spartan soldiers sleep in a random pile of naked or nearly-naked men. Do you think this image is intended to sexualize or homo-sexualize the Spartan soldiers?

Examine the depiction of the Spartan city in the first chapter—particularly the large pane on page 13. What aspects of Spartan life are illustrated? What aspects of Spartan life are missing? How do you think a similar scene from an Arcadian city would be different?

The ephors are corrupt and Leonidas describes them as perverted and decrepit. How do you think they came to be in absolute command of the Spartan governmental system?

Some of the Greek soldiers wear heavy breastplates and metal or stiff leather armor on their arms and legs. The Spartans do not. Why do you think the Spartans enter combat with only a helmet and a shield?

Ephialtes is obviously deformed in many ways but appears to have a normal intellect. Why does he seek to join the Spartans? Why does he attempt suicide? Why does he eventually betray Sparta and Greece to the Persians? At first it may appear that Ephialtes' survival was bad for Leonidas—but from a historical perspective is this necessarily the case? Why or why not?

After having his arm hacked off, the Persian Ambassador delivers a rather lengthy threat. Do you find this ability to resist massive injury realistic? What other grievous injuries are presented in the text? Are they debilitating?

Xerxes blames—and executes—his generals for failing to take the Hot Gates. Describe the various waves of Persian forces which are sent against the Spartans. How do the Spartans' tactics change to effectively meet each new challenge? If you were the Persian general how would you deploy your forces to achieve victory (assuming you did not know about the hidden goat path)?

Consider the artwork throughout the graphic novel. Which panes are particularly effective? Which panes are your favorites? Are the amounts of nudity and violence depicted in the text objectionable?

The Persian King Xerxes is illustrated as a massive and fit man who is weighed down by gold jewelry; the Spartans clearly consider him effeminate. How does his portrayal influence your understanding of the character?

Greek hoplites were usually armed with a spear about eight feet in length, called a doru, and a short sword called a xiphos. Which weapon was usually used? Why?

Who was the victor at the Hot Gates? Xerxes or Leonidas? The Persians or the Spartans? Or the non-Spartan Greeks? Discuss.