**The Persian Wars:** Guided Notes

Using questions to analyze the validity of a historical narrative

Persian Wars Timeline

400 BCE:

400 BCE:

480 BCE:

480 BCE:

479 BCE:

The Traditional Narrative of the Persian Wars:

Enduring Understandings and Essential Questions:

1) We can use questions in history to evaluate the validity of primary or secondary source

2) Question the narrative (or story) of any historical book or film.

3) How do we question a historical narrative?

Analyzing 300

What questions will we use?

Overall Interpretation of the clips:

Homework

**5 MYTHS OF THE PERSIAN WARS**

In part because of the bias of the *Hellenes* and *Romans*, modern *Hollywood*, and a general lack of research in the field there are many misconceptions today about the *Ancient Persians*. In this article we will try to dispel some of the more popular myths, and attempt to find the truth behind them.

**MYTH ONE: The Persians were out to enslave the world**
Undoubtedly the most widespread myth of all was that the *Persians*, the *Achaemenids* in particular, created their empire so that they could expand and enslave the whole planet. This is propaganda pure and simple, created by the *Hellenes* to give their conflict with Persia a more heroic light. Distortion by modern revisionism and *Hollywood* has only increased this. In truth the *Persians* did not want to enslave the world. It went against the very nature of the *Achaemenid Empire*, founded by *Cyrus II the Great* on the principles of equal treatment and full rights for all subject nations in the *Persian Empire*. There is no reason to believe that any *Achaemenid* monarch ever swerved from *Cyrus’* intentions, which was one of the most unique features of *Achaemenid* monarchy.

**MYTH TWO: The Greco-Persian Wars was a fight for freedom and democracy against Persian Tyranny**
Rivaling with the above is the myth, accepted even by the historical community at large, that *Greco-Persian Wars* was a fight for freedom, the first conflict of East and West, and so on. In reality the *Greco-Persian Wars* are far more complicated then that, and attempting to put our own modern views on the conflict only do disservice to both sides. As a side note the *Persians* originally did not view *Hellas* as worth their time. It was only when the mainland *Hellenes* sent aid to the rebelling *Ionians*, which resulted in the burning of *Sardis*, that the *Persians* took notice and the wars began.

**MYTH THREE: The Persian Shahanshah thought himself a ‘god-Emperor’**
A popular myth with origins in the *Hellenic* misunderstanding of *Persian* tradition surrounding their idea of kingship is the belief that the *Persian* ruler was thought of as a ‘god-emperor’ and thus worshiped by his subjects. Even today much continues to be unknown in regards to the *Persian* kingship. What we do is that the *Shahanshah* held a very important role in the *Persian* religious universe, and was elevated to an exalted level above all other men. But the *Shahanshah* was never worshiped, just held in great awe since, according to *Persian* ritual, he was the chosen one of *Ahura Mazdah*, supreme deity of *Ancient Persia*.

**MYTH FOUR: The Achaemenids were Zoroastrian and promoted that religion above all others**
One of the more widespread myths, even among the modern scholars of today, is the belief that the *Achaemenid* dynasty was officially *Zoroastrian* and that the *Shahanshah* actively promoted the religion. This seems to be a case of mixing up the *Achaemenid* and *Sassanian* dynasties, as only the *Sassanians* made *Zoroastrianism* the State Religion and actively enforced it on the realm. Whatever religion the *Achaemenid* royal family itself followed was never forced on the empire, and *Cyrus II* (himself a devotee of *Marduk*, the supreme deity of *Babylon*) and *Darius I* ( possible *Zoroastrian*, but more likely just a devotee of *Ahura Mazdah*) made that clear in their decrees. Religious freedom was a major building block of the *Achaemenid Empire*.

**MYTH FIVE: Persian Women**
A common myth today that has its origins more in the **19th century**, though heavily influenced by the *Hellenes*, then anywhere else is the belief that the *Persians* regarded women, especially their own women, as good for little more then decorating the harem and having babies. In addition royal women were thought to be corrupt control freaks, and that the *Persian* men could not control them was a sign of decadence. This is a misconception on a massive scale, and one that remains sadly common today. In reality *Persian* women always had a great deal of personal freedom through all three dynasties and even from before the *Achaemenids* during the time of the *Medes*. In short there was nothing that they could not do, and both the *Hellenes* and *Romans* attest to the fact that on the battlefield it was not uncommon to see units of women fighting alongside the men. Particularly notable, and to their sensibilities horrifying, was the sight of female officers and generals commanding the men. Other common roles for women were that of priestess (especially to the cult of *Anahita*, the mother of *Mithra*), public leader, and ‘guardian of learning’. On the subject of royal women, especially the *Achaemenid* women, that is a matter of great continuing debate. In short what can be said is that the extent of the powers and influence of the women within the Royal Palace was decided by how much latitude the *Shahanshah* let them have in affairs.
*(article adapted from wildfire games.com)*

WRITING ASSIGNMENT HOMEWORK

1) Read article on the Myths of the Persian War

2) Write a short movie review of the 300:

**R**ole: Historian Movie Critic

**A**udience: Newspaper Readers

**F**ormat: 1 Paragraph Movie Review

**T**heme: The accuracy (or lack of accuracy) in the 300 Film

Using your own knowledge of the Persian wars and the article above, critique 300’s traditional narrative. Write one paragraph reviewing the film clips.

Recommend Three Questions for Your Readers

Create three questions that your readers can use if they want to analyze the validity of a historical narrative in a film or book