

Gateway to Humanities

Classics

Approaching Classics through Classical Studies

The Persian Wars



Woe is me! where can I go,
where halt, or turn? shall I
crawl like a wild four-
footed beast on their track,
as my reward? Which path
shall I take first, this or
that, eager as I am to clutch
those Trojan murderesses
that have destroyed me?
You wretched, cursed
daughters of Phrygia! to
what corner have you fled
cowering before me? O
sun-god, would you could
heal, could heal my
bleeding eyes, ridding me
of my blindness!

Where?

Where shall I run?

Where shall I stop?

Where?

Like a raging beast I go,
running on all fours
to track my quarry down!

Where?

Where?

Here?

Where?

where can I pounce
on those murderous hags of Troy?

Where are you women?

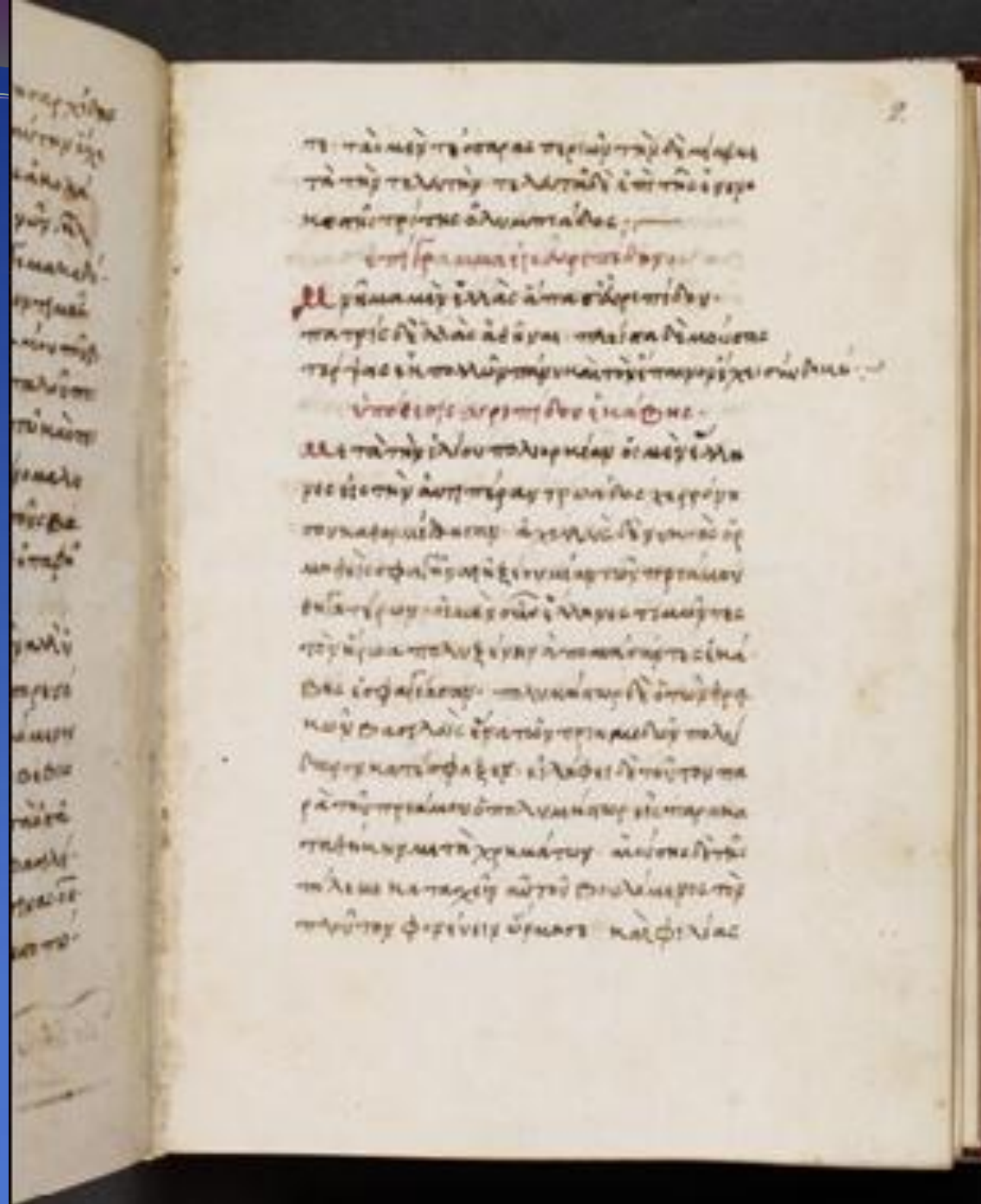
Where are they hiding,
those bitches of Troy?

O god of the sun,
heal these bleeding eyes!

Give me back the light of my eyes!

Transmitting the Text

- Manuscripts
- Late antique – early Medieval
- Different copies – finding the original
- Inscriptions
- Papyri



Aeschylus and his *Persians*

- 472 BC: *Phineus*, *Persians*, *Glaucus of Potniae*, *Prometheus Fire-Kindler*.
- Aeschylus: *fl.* 499 – 456 BC
 - Eleusinian, wealthy family, soldier
 - Poet, composer, choreographer, costume designer (?), actor ...





Historical Tragedies

- Phrynichus' *Capture of Miletus*: The Athenians made clear their deep grief for the taking of Miletus in many ways, but especially in this: when Phrynichus wrote a play entitled "The Fall of Miletus" and produced it, the whole theatre fell to weeping; they fined Phrynichus a thousand drachmas for bringing to mind a calamity that affected them so personally, and forbade the performance of that play forever. [Herodotus 6.21]
- It clearly follows that the poet or 'maker' should be the maker of plots rather than of verses; since he is a poet because he represents, and what he represents are actions. And even if he chances to take a historical subject, he is none the less a poet; for there is no reason why some events that have actually happened should not conform to the law of the probable and possible, and in virtue of that quality in them he is their poet or maker. [Aristotle, *Poetics* 1451b]

Historical Tragedies

- *Hypothesis of The Persians by Aeschylus*: Glaucus, in his work concerning the stories of Aeschylus, claims that *The Persians* was modelled after Phrynichus' *Phoenician Women*. He even provides the opening of the play, which is as follows: This is the realm of those Persians long ago departed — except that in that play it is a eunuch who announces Xerxes' defeat at the beginning of the play as he prepares seats for the royal Persian counsellors, while here the chorus of elders performs the prologue. The setting of the play is near the tomb of Darius. The plot is as follows: Xerxes, leading an expedition against Greece, was defeated in a land battle at Plataea and in a naval engagement at Salamis. He fled through Thessaly and made it to Asia.

- *The Persians* takes place in Susa, and opens with a chorus of old men of Susa, who are soon joined by the Queen Mother, Atossa, as they await news of her son King Xerxes' expedition against the Greeks.
- Expressing her anxiety and unease, Atossa narrates a dream sequence. An exhausted messenger arrives, who offers a graphic description of the Battle of Salamis and its gory outcome. He tells of the Persian defeat, the names of the Persian generals who have been killed, and that Xerxes had escaped and is returning. The climax of the messenger's speech is his rendition of the battle cry of the Greeks as they charged: "*On, sons of Greece! Set free / Your fatherland, your children, wives, / Homes of your ancestors and temples of your gods! / Save all, or all is lost!*" (401-405).
- At the tomb of her dead husband Darius, Atossa asks the chorus to summon his ghost: "Some remedy he knows, perhaps, / Knows ruin's cure" they say. On learning of the Persian defeat, Darius condemns the hubris behind his son's decision to invade Greece. He particularly rebukes an impious Xerxes' decision to build a bridge over the Hellespont to expedite the Persian army's advance. Before departing, the ghost of Darius prophesies another Persian defeat at the Battle of Plataea (479 BCE): "Where the plain grows lush and green, / Where Asopus' stream plumps rich Boeotia's soil, / The mother of disasters awaits them there, / Reward for insolence, for scorning God."
- Xerxes finally arrives, dressed in torn robes and reeling from his crushing defeat. The rest of the drama (908-1076) consists of the king alone with the chorus engaged in a lyrical *kommós* that laments the enormity of Persia's defeat.

“Where is Athens?”

Qu: My friends, where is Athens said to be?

Ch: Far toward the dying flames of the sun.

Qu: Yet still my son lusts to track it down?

Ch: Then all Hellas would be subject to the king.

Qu: So rich in numbers are they?

Ch: So great a host

As dealt to Persians many woes.

Qu: Are bow-plucked shafts their armament?

Ch: Pikes wielded-close and shielded panoplies.

Qu: What else besides? Have they sufficing wealth?

Ch: Their earth is veined with silver treasuries.

Qu: Who commands them? Who is shepherd of their host?

Ch: They are slaves to none, nor are they subject.

Qu: But how could they withstand a foreign foe?

Ch: Enough to vanquish Darius' noble host.

Aeschylus, *Persians* [472 BC]

- Necromancy of Darius
- Hubris:
 - **GHOST OF DARIUS** With what a winged course the oracles Haste their completion! With the lightning's speed Jove on my son hath hurled his threaten'd vengeance: Yet I implored the gods that it might fall In time's late process: but when rashness drives Impetuous on, the scourge of Heaven upraised Lashes the Fury forward; hence these ills Pour headlong on my friends. Not weighing this, My son, with all the fiery pride of youth, Hath quickened their arrival, while he hoped

To bind the sacred Hellespont, to hold
The raging Bosphorus, like a slave, in chains,
And dared the advent'rous passage, bridging firm
With links of solid iron his wondrous way,
To lead his numerous host; and swell'd with thoughts
Presumptuous, deem'd, vain mortal! that his power
Should rise above the gods, and Neptune's might.
And was riot this the phrensy of the soul?
But much I fear lest all my treasured wealth
Fall to some daring hand an easy prey.

Atossa's Dream

Two women as an apparition came,
One in Persian robes instructed well,
The other Doric, both in splendour
dressed,
Who grand and most magnificent excelled
Us now, their beauty unreproached,
spotless;
Sisters they, who casting for their father's
land,
She Greece received, she Asia, where to
dwell.
Then strife arose between them, or so I
dreamed;
And my son, observing this, tries to check
And soothe them; he yokes them to a
chariot,
Bridles their necks: and one, so arrayed,
towers

Proud, her mouth obedient to reins;
But the other stamps, annoyed, and rends
apart
Her trappings in her hands; unbridled,
seizes
The car and snaps its yoke in two;
My son falls, and his father, pitying,
Stands by his side, but at whose sight
Xerxes
Tears his robes.

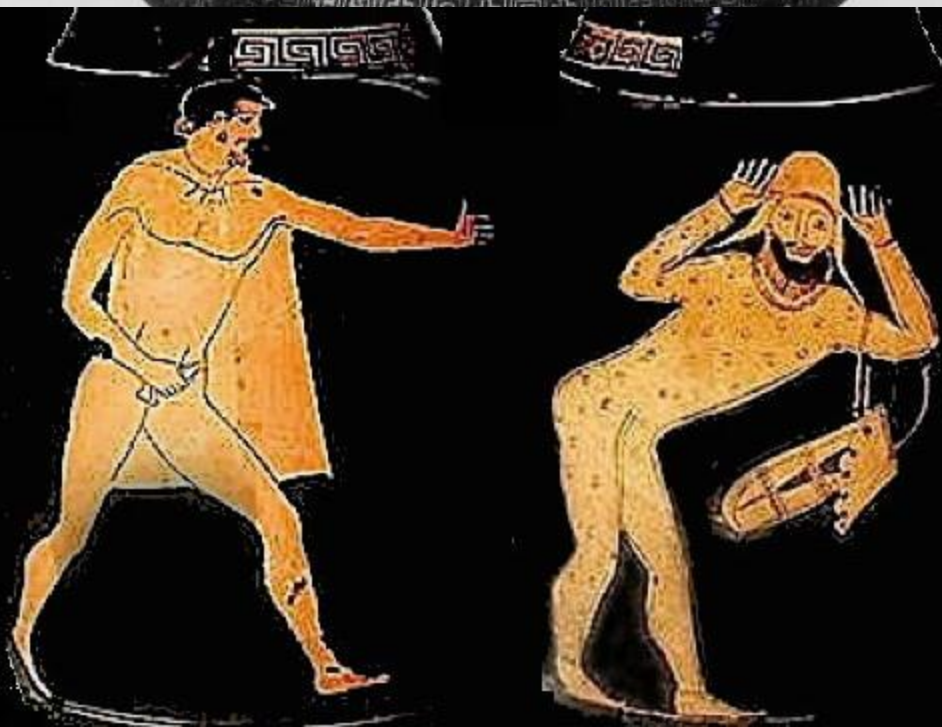
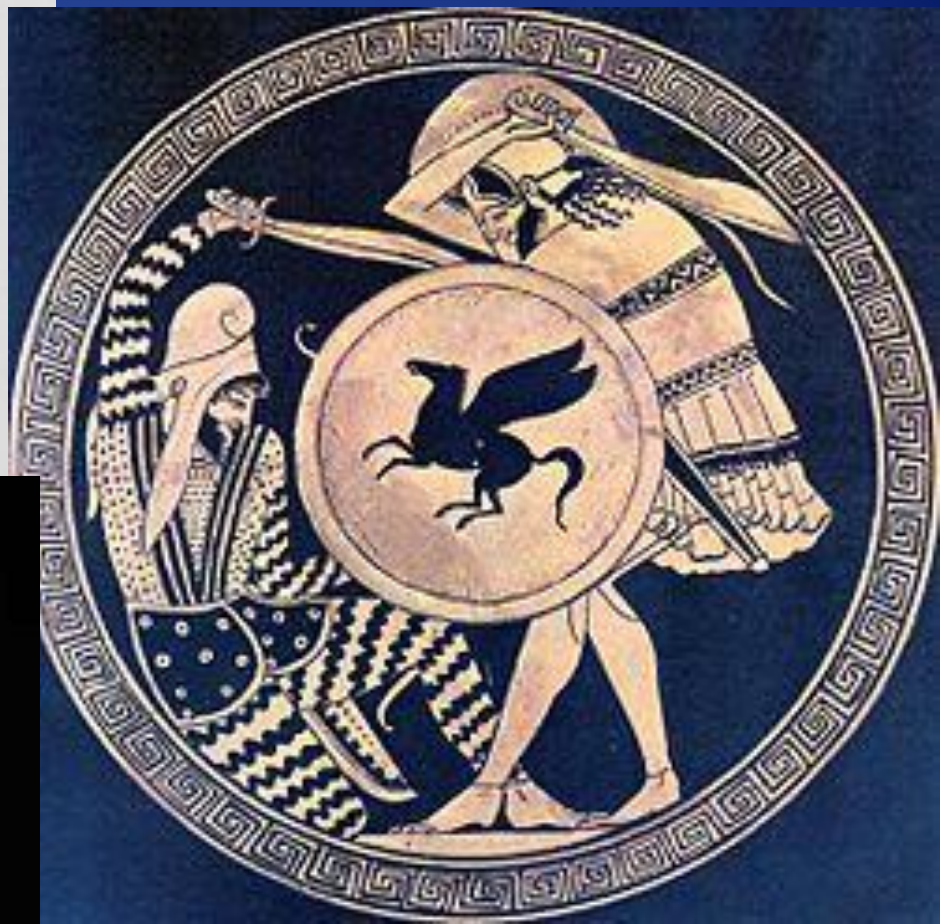


Aeschylus, *Persians* [472 BC]

- The Islands:
 - **CHORUS:** Each sea-girt isle around
Bow'd to this monarch: humbled Lesbos
bow'd;
Paros, of its marble proud;
Naxos with vines, with olives Samos
crown'd:
Him Myconos adored;
Chios, the seat of beauty; Andros steep,
That stretches o'er the deep
To meet the wat'ry Tenos; him each bay
Bound by the Icarian sea,
Him Melos, Gnidus, Rhodes confess'd
their lord;
O'er Cyprus stretch'd his sceptred hand:
Paphos and Solos own'd his power,
And Salamis, whose hostile strand,
The cause of all our wo, is red with
Persian gore.









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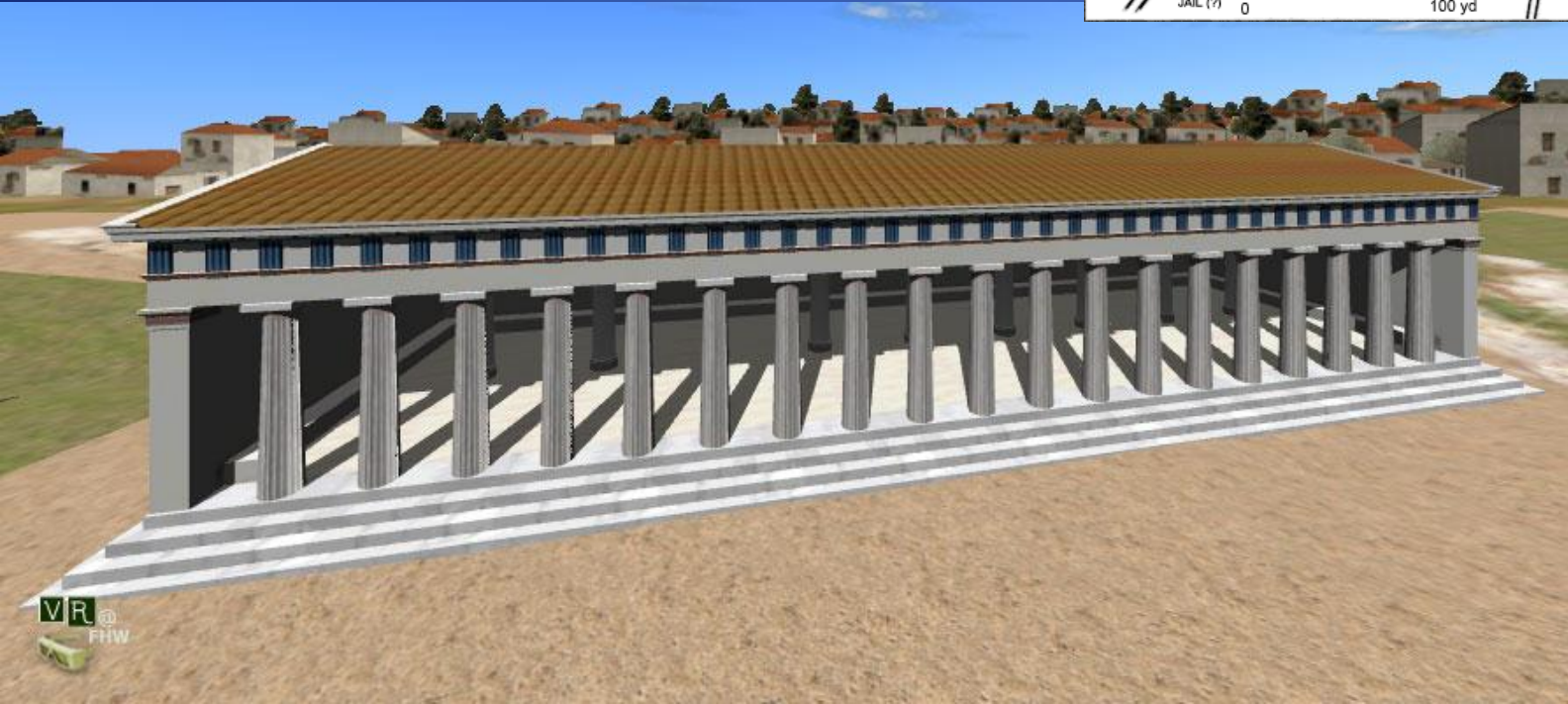
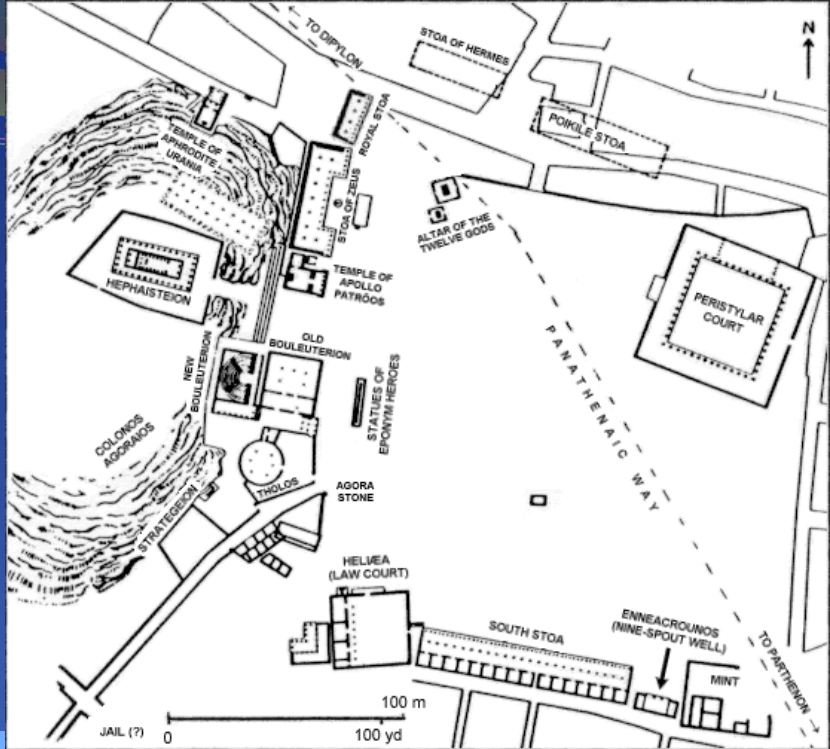
Amazonomachy

Sexualising
Greek vs.
East



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Stoa Poikile
475-450 BC



Stoa Poikile 475-50 BC

Pausanias 1.15:

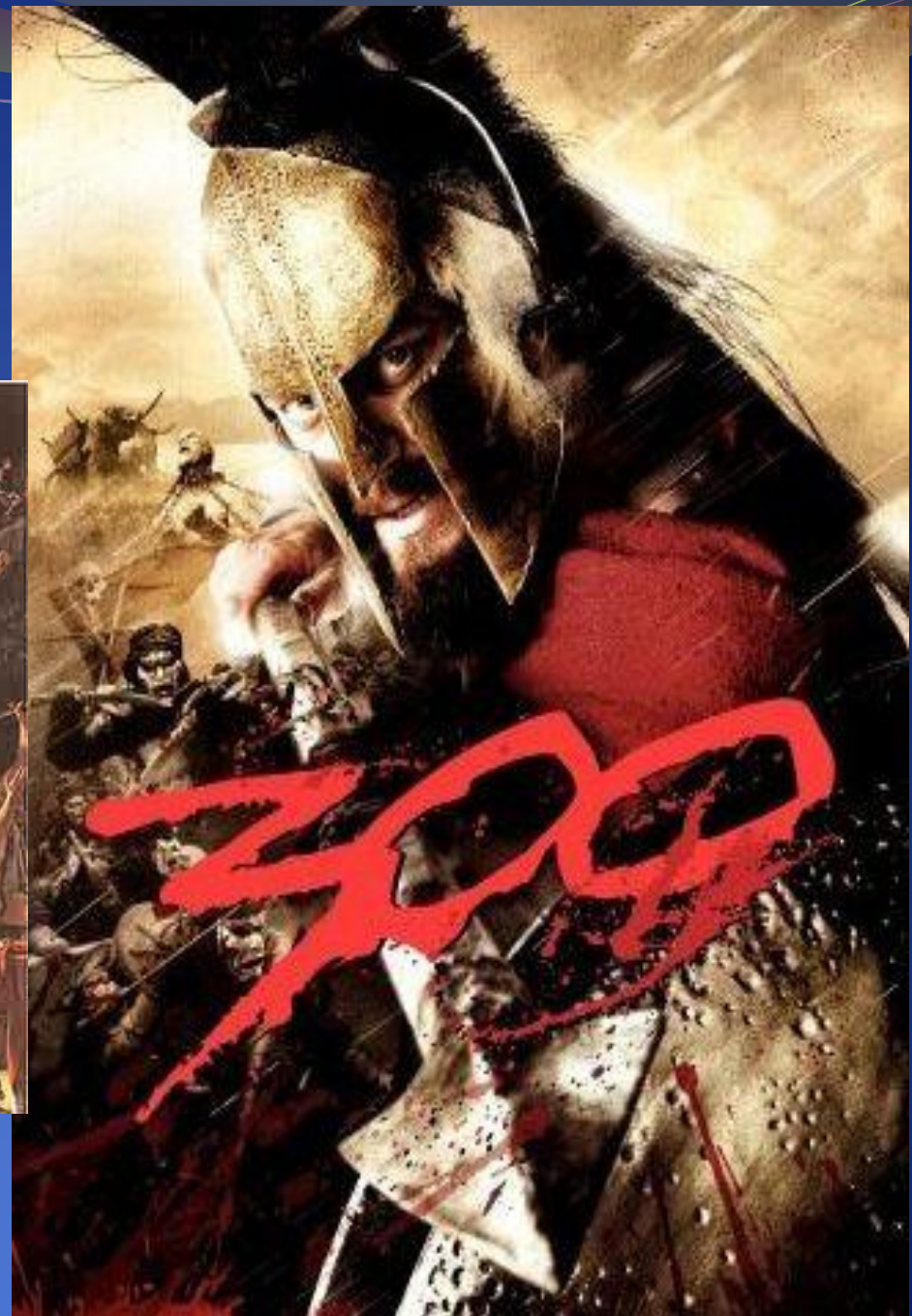
- This portico contains, first, the Athenians arrayed against the Lacedaemonians at Oenoe in the Argive territory. What is depicted is not the crisis of the battle nor when the action had advanced as far as the display of deeds of valour, but the beginning of the fight when the combatants were about to close.
- On the middle wall are the Athenians and Theseus fighting with the Amazons. [...] the army which they dispatched to Athens was destroyed ...
- After the Amazons come the Greeks when they have taken Troy, and the kings assembled on account of the outrage committed by Ajax against Cassandra. The picture includes Ajax himself, Cassandra and other captive women.
- At the end of the painting are those who fought at Marathon; the Boeotians of Plataea and the Attic contingent are coming to blows with the foreigners. [...] the centre of the fighting shows the foreigners in flight and pushing one another into the morass, while at the end of the painting are the Phoenician ships, and the Greeks killing the foreigners who are scrambling into them. Here is also a portrait of the hero Marathon, after whom the plain is named, of Theseus represented as coming up from the under-world, of Athena and of Heracles. [...] Of the fighters the most conspicuous figures in the painting are Callimachus, who had been elected commander-in-chief by the Athenians, Miltiades, one of the generals, and a hero called Echelus.

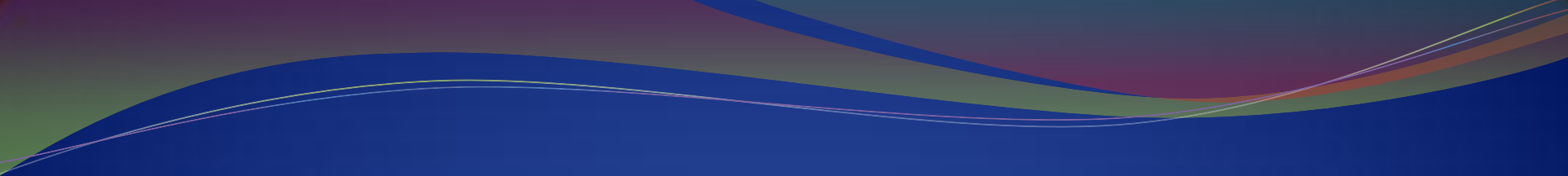
• THE isles of Greece! the isles of Greece!
Where burning Sappho loved and sung,
Where grew the arts of war and peace,---
Where Delos rose and Phoebus sprung!
Eternal summer gilds them yet,
But all, except their sun, is set. The Scian and
the Teian muse,
The hero's harp, the lover's lute,
Have found the fame your shores refuse;
Their place of birth alone is mute
To sounds which echo further west
Than your sires' "Islands of the Blest." The
mountains look on Marathon---
And Marathon looks on the sea;
And musing there an hour alone,
I dream'd that Greece might yet be free
For, standing on the Persians' grave,
I could not deem myself a slave. A king sat on
the rocky brow
Which looks on sea-born Salamis;
And ships, by thousands, lay below,
And men in nations;---all were his!
He counted them at break of day---
And when the sun set, where were they? And
where are they? and where art thou,
My country? On thy voiceless shore
The heroic lay is tuneless now---
The heroic bosom beats no more! [Byron]

Reception



Reception





Questions?