



Massimo d'Azeglio created this painting - "The Battle of Thermopylae" in 1823. He tells us about it in his Recollections:

I paint a picture representing "Leonidas at Thermopylae," which my father offers to King Charles Felix Don Luigi de' Principi Spada, a good fellow, but very hare-brained. He had let himself be involved in the secret societies. Secret societies in Rome in the year 1824. Nobody ever proposed to me to join in any political conspiracy, political assassination, and the sects which resort to it.
(Recollections of Massimo D'Azeglio, Volume 2, by Massimo Taparelli Azeglio (Marchese d'), Massimo d' Azeglio, at page 200.)

Although the painting is beautiful, it is also fanciful in a significant way. How did the area actually appear at the time of the famous battle?

To answer that question, we look to Herodotus (and George Rawlinson's English translation):

As for the entrance into Greece by Trachis, it is, at its narrowest point, about fifty feet wide. This however is not the place where the passage is most contracted; for it is still narrower a little above and a little below Thermopylae. At Alpeni, which is lower down than that place, it is only wide enough for a single carriage; and up above, at the river Phoenix, near the town called Anthela, it is the same.

West of Thermopylae rises a lofty and precipitous hill, impossible to climb, which runs up into the chain of Oeta; while to the east the road is shut in by the sea and by marshes. In this place are the warm springs, which the natives call "The Cauldrons," and above them stands an altar sacred to Hercules. (See Herodotus, Book VII, 176 at page 122 of the Rawlinson translation.)

For a more-modern translation of the key sentence, from that passage, we have these words:

On the west side of Thermopylae is a mountain that cannot be climbed, with a cliff-face and wooded, stretching up to Mount Oeta; and the sea and swampy ground come right up to the east side of the track. (Herodotus, *Histories*, Book 7, Chapter 176.)

In other words ... cliffs did not drop, precipitously, into the Gulf of Malis (as depicted here and in many other works of art and film).

Credits:

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