The resilience of the out-gunned Greek army against the immense Persian forces during the ancient Battle of Thermopylae is regarded as the prime example of how courage and tactical guile can match size and power.

This Saturday night, Athenian Mike Arnaoutis will need to display the same fortitude as his countrymen if he is to withstand the violent offense of Victor Ortiz in their HBO-televised bout in San Jose, California.

Ortiz has blitzed through his opposition on route to compiling a 23-1-1 (18 KOs) record and earning recognition from many publications as the brightest prospect in the sport. His only setbacks have been a technical draw and disqualification loss, and bare no reflection on the Californian's adaptable boxing style that is complemented with a striking blend of speed, power and a boyish charm that could conceivably make Ortiz a crossover star. Promotional heavyweights Golden Boy and Top Rank have already engaged in a hostile battle for the services of the junior welterweight credited with the ferocity of Fernando Vargas and the magnetism of Oscar De La Hoya.

Conversely, Arnaoutis has lost much of the lustre that saw him attract noisy Greek-American crowds during his string of appearances on Showtime's ShoBox series a few years ago. After going 19 fights without a loss, the New Jersey-domiciled fighter suffered two consecutive defeats in relatively high-profile matchups.

Arnaoutis, 21-2-2 (10 KOs), received the opportunity to face Ortiz after the withdrawal of faded veteran Vivian Harris, and it is a condemnation of the Greek's standing that he is in the role of a facilitator to the development of a 21-year-old's career.

It wasn't long ago that Arnaoutis was at the center of marketing campaigns and careful match-making. He was first discovered by Mike Michael of the now defunct London-based Panix Promotions that once guided Lennox Lewis. As professional sports are somewhat ironically frowned upon in the home of the Olympic Games, Arnaoutis knew that he would have to leave Greece if he wanted to chase his pugilistic ambitions. Consequently, he bombarded Michael with phone calls for six months until the Londoner made the trip to Athens to view the fighter who claimed 12 Greek amateur titles.

"In Greece, if you have the professional boxing talent, you will still end up being a policeman or a member of the government because that's the way it is, unless you leave," said Michael in 2006.

Realizing that Arnaoutis had some potential, Michael brought him to London and subsequently America with the expectations of making the young fighter into a crowd pleasing puncher that could attract strong interest from an ethnic following.

“Greek-Americans would love to embrace a fighter,” said Pete Spanakos, a 1960 U.S. Olympian of Hellenic heritage. “They would go nuts. If the Greek media took hold of this kid, his career would take off. I can’t even imagine what it would be like seeing a Greek flag waving at Madison Square Garden.”

Such an occasion initially seemed a likely possibility as Arnaoutis knocked out the normally durable Jessie Feliciano in the first round, one fight after an entertaining draw with the then-unbeaten powerhouse Juan Urango. Arnaoutis combined sharp-punching from his southpaw stance with nifty footwork and a quick jab and seemed ready for a world title in 2006 after signing with Joe DeGuardia’s Star Boxing.

Yet his meeting with WBO 140-pound beltholder Ricardo Torres ended in frustration as two of the ringside judges favored the champion by narrow margins. Arnaoutis seemed seconds from a definitive victory in the seventh round after flooring Torres in spectacular fashion. But he failed to capitalize on the opening and spent the remainder of the fight seeking a one-punch knockout instead of dictating the contest with his slick combination punching. Torres regrouped and ultimately outworked Arnaoutis for the points victory.

Most of the media in attendance had Arnaoutis winning the bout and the loss seemed to be purely a consequence of inexperience rather than any obvious shortcomings.

“This was a fight that Arnaoutis could — and should — have won,” reported veteran boxing writer Graham Houston. “It was a learning experience for the previously unbeaten Arnaoutis, and I think he can come back a better fighter, but on this night he failed to seize the moment — and the moment passed all too quickly.”

In his next outing Arnaoutis was presented with another significant opportunity when he was paired with the touted Kendall Holt. Yet the intriguing matchup turned into a desultory affair that ESPN accurately described as “horrible and a big disappointment”. Both fighters showed a reluctance to engage and Arnaoutis seemed baffled by Holt’s flashy style, only displaying aggression in the bout’s closing stages.

Arnaoutis was floored in the final round of the fight and the affair seemed to dull his appetite for the fightgame, leading to an 11-month layoff.

In his biggest tests, Arnaoutis appeared caught between styles. While he possesses solid classical boxing skills, he has a tendency to search for highlight reel one-punch finishes instead of consistently unleashing the smooth flurries that brought him success earlier in his career. He does not administer remarkable punching power, and the damaging shots landed on Feliciano and Torres were a result of high quality technique instead of natural force.

Arnaoutis was conceivably carried away by trying to impress his growing Greek-American soccer-style fanbase with spectacular knockouts instead of playing to his more functional strengths.

Since the setback against Holt, the 29-year-old has rattled off four victories against mediocre

opposition and has undertaken changes on both sides of the ropes that figure to boost his sagging prizefighting career.

Six months ago he had his first child with wife Eleni and the new arrival seems to have provided Arnaoutis with renewed vigour.

“Things are different now,” he explains. “I have a lot more responsibility since [the birth of my daughter]. She inspires me to train harder and come fight night I know she will be motivating me to go out there and look my absolute best.”

Arnaoutis has also split from Mike Michael and worked with a variety of trainers before settling on James “Buddy” McGirt. The latter development ought to see Arnaoutis focus more on slick movement and conventional boxing technique, two attributes that brought McGirt and a variety of his fighters world title success. Arnaoutis says his experience with McGirt in Florida has been so fruitful that he will leave his New Jersey base in favor of a permanent move to the Sunshine State.

Crafty boxing will be a prerequisite if Arnaoutis aspires to disrupt Ortiz’ charge toward the top of the 140-pound division. Ortiz, a southpaw himself, has yet to face a skilful portsider, while Arnaoutis has the experience of battling the rugged Urango. Moreover, Arnaoutis must feel better about the blemishes on his slate given the subsequent prominent performances by Urango, Torres and Holt.

A focused gameplan that plays to Arnaoutis’ assets of quick combination punching coalesced with clever use of the ring will give the Greek his best shot at thwarting the fierce intent of his opponent. But the remorseless march of Ortiz can only be momentarily resisted.

Defending Thermopylae must have been a less daunting task.