

Some time probably in the year 508/7 B.C. Gorgo, a daughter of the senior royal house of Sparta, was born. She was the only child of King Cleomenes, who reigned between 520 and 490. A king would naturally always want a son to follow him and be his heir, but Cleomenes was not blessed with any male children; as one ancient writer put it, "Cleomenes died childless, leaving only a daughter". That the king was said to be "childless", despite the fact that he did have a daughter, is indicative of how important it was for any ancient Greek - especially a monarch - to leave a son behind him.

But Cleomenes need not have been concerned that his child would be of no value to Sparta because she was "only a girl". It was true that she could never follow her father on the throne, but Gorgo apparently had other worthwhile qualities. She grew up to be an intelligent woman who soon became legendary for her ability to see through people and solve problems. She was also renowned as a queen who used her talents wisely and well in her complete dedication to the fatherland.

Gorgo displayed these characteristics at an early age, and we may conjecture that her abilities were fostered by her education. Although a member of the royal family, Gorgo no doubt had an upbringing much like other Spartan girls of the citizen class. Both male and female children of this class (the "Spartiates") had childhoods very different from those of their counterparts in other states of ancient Greece. Boys left home at the age of seven and entered a system of military training which was geared to producing the perfect citizen - a soldier of unquestioning loyalty who would gladly die in the service of his country. Girls, of course, did not undergo military training, but they were educated to a degree uncommon in the rest of Greece. While her Athenian counterpart might be spending her tender years in learning the mysterious arts of woolworking and housekeeping, as well as learning to become properly subservient to men in preparation for her marriage at the age of 14 or so, a Spartan girl would be practicing physical sport and learning at least the rudiments of poetry and

music. In contrast to Athenian girls and women, who lived a fairly secluded life, Spartan females took an active part in public musical and athletic festivals, and, in keeping with Spartan anti-luxury laws, they would not learn the use of cosmetics, jewellery and fine clothing. They were unlikely to marry until the advanced age of 18, but even so, marriage - specifically the bearing of children - formed the primary goal of a Spartan woman's life. In Sparta, though, the chief emphasis was on bearing a child not so much for one's husband, as for the state. Spartan women were to produce the healthy warriors of the next generation (hence the importance of an athletic education for women). So service to the state was inculcated in a Spartan girl-child no less than a boy-child, and it was with great pride that a Spartan mother handed over her sons to be made into soldiers.

But Gorgo's service to the state was said to have begun long before she was old enough to be bearing children to be kings and warriors. She probably shared in the kind of education typical for a Spartiate female; in addition she seems to have benefitted from her association with her father, King Cleomenes. The King of Sparta does not seem to have been the kind of man to shut his daughter away from society and keep her hidden. Rather, it appears that Gorgo may have been accustomed to spending much time with her father. We might even speculate, from the absence of any information about Gorgo's mother, that Cleomenes' wife perhaps died young, and that Gorgo and Cleomenes, as the only two family members, were perhaps closer than may have been usual for father and daughter in ancient Greece. Indeed, when we first hear of Gorgo, she is keeping her father company as he entertains a foreign dignitary.

The dignitary was one Aristagoras, an important individual from the Asia Minor city-state of Miletus. He came to Sparta in the year 499 in order to enlist King Cleomenes' help in a vital project: the Greeks of Asia Minor had determined to throw off the yoke of Persian domination. After nearly half a century of being subjects of the great Persian Empire, the Greek city-states of the coast of Asia Minor (the area generally known as Ionia) had decided to revolt, and in the year 499 they were busily trying to attract the Greek states of the mainland to their cause. Aristagoras, one of the chief forces behind the rebellion, travelled to Sparta to urge Cleomenes to help the Ionians.

It was a common notion among many Greeks that Spartans, because they lived such an austere life at home, were particularly susceptible to the time-honoured diplomatic tool of bribery. Accordingly, Aristagoras, rather than wasting much breath with an appeal to the notion of Greek solidarity in the face of the decadent "barbarian" Persians, instead tried to appeal to Cleomenes' sense of greed. "Look what you would gain if you were to attack the Persians," he said. "They are richer than all the rest of the world put together - they have everything, gold, silver, bronze, elaborately embroidered clothes and beasts of burden and slaves. All this you may have if you wish."

Cleomenes at first gave no answer to Aristagoras, asking instead for time to think it over. We do not know what he might have decided as a result of Aristagoras' enticing suggestions. What we do know - or at least what the ancient historians tell us - is that when Cleomenes and Aristagoras met again, Cleomenes, before giving any answer to the Milesian, asked him how far away from the Mediterranean sea-coast the heartland of Persia was. Aristagoras reportedly blundered by telling the Spartan king the truth: that it was a three-month journey. Cleomenes cut him off right there, and refused to have anything more to do with him, ordering him to leave Sparta before sunset. He realized that it would never be in the Spartans' interest to involve themselves in such a vast undertaking.

But Aristagoras was a determined, and perhaps desperate man. Instead of leaving Sparta immediately he made his way to Cleomenes' home, taking care to adopt the formal pose of a suppliant, lest the king take it into his head to do his visitor any harm. He then set about the business of actually bribing Cleomenes. It is in this context that we first meet Gorgo. She was only eight or nine years old at the time, and was keeping her father company when Aristagoras arrived. Aristagoras asked the king to send his daughter away while they talked, but Cleomenes refused. If the story has any truth, Aristagoras probably did not want any third party around, not even a child, as the matters he was going to discuss with the King - i.e. bribery - were now private. If Cleomenes could be induced to persuade the Spartans to get involved in the rebellion not because it was in their interest, but as a result of a private bribe, then neither Cleomenes nor Aristagoras could afford to have any hint of that fact become known. However, the reputation of virtue and intelligence which Gorgo developed

lends another dimension to the story as well. She seemed to specialize in seeing through people, and Aristagoras may have feared the child would see through his designs and put a stop to them before they could be put into effect. According to the story, that is exactly what she did. Aristagoras was forced after all to speak in her presence, and he began by offering Cleomenes a bribe of 10 talents. Cleomenes refused, and Aristagoras set about raising the offer. He had reached a figure of 50 talents, a very large sum of money, when Gorgo suddenly intervened. "Father", she said, "you'd better leave the room, or the stranger will corrupt you with his bribes". Did she perceive Cleomenes to be weakening? At any rate, the king's resolve was apparently reinforced by his daughter's suggestion. He left the room and Aristagoras left Sparta.

So the legend of Gorgo attested to her wit and clarity of insight at an early age. Through the years, more stories came to be told of how Gorgo helped her father retain his sense of virtue and justice. For example, while Aristagoras was still in Sparta, the little girl made a comment on the luxury and effeminacy of their Ionian visitor. His slave was dressing him one day and Gorgo, observing this, remarked to her father that Aristagoras must not have any hands. This of course provided an unfavourable contrast between the decadent Aristagoras and the self-reliant Spartans. At another time she reportedly admonished her father for instituting a better brand of wine in Sparta. "If you do," she said, "people will drink much more wine, and then they will degenerate". Again Gorgo appears as the youthful exemplar of traditional Spartan qualities of moderation and self-control.

In the next issue of *Labyrinth*, we'll see how Gorgo became the queen of Sparta and continued to use her talents to serve her homeland.

*The Senior Royal House (the Agiads) at Sparta*

