

Gorgo: A Spartan Queen (II)

by S.L. Ager

As a child, the Spartan Gorgo is said to have influenced her father, King Cleomenes, a claim not impossible, even if highly romanticized. In the last issue of Labyrinth, we saw how Gorgo was said to have wisely advised her father on various issues. For example, she pointed out to him that he would be wrong to improve the quality of Spartan wine, as that would simply mean increased alcohol consumption at Sparta. But it would appear that Gorgo's admonitions to Cleomenes were not always effective. Towards the end of his life Cleomenes exhibited symptoms of insanity, which the Spartans virtuously, if not perhaps scientifically, put down to his habit of drinking wine straight (i.e. without mixing it with water). Cleomenes died around 490 B.C. in a rather horrible fashion: by now completely insane, he sliced himself to death with a sharp knife.

Gorgo would have been about 17 or 18 years old when her father killed himself. If she had been a boy she would of course have inherited the throne herself, but in ancient Sparta a woman could never rule, not least because one of the chief duties of the Spartan kings was to lead the army in times of war. But that did not mean that the Spartans ignored her or her royal position utterly when it came to choosing their next king. Normally they would have chosen Cleomenes' son to be king. Cleomenes had left no son, but he did leave a son-in-law: Gorgo was married to her own "half-uncle", Cleomenes' half-brother Leonidas (incidentally, this was a perfectly legitimate relationship among the Greeks, especially among royalty, and would not have been considered incestuous). Leonidas' chief claim to the throne was the fact that he was the brother of the

deceased king. But there may have been rival claimants, in particular a certain nephew of Cleomenes, and it seems that one of the factors which clinched Leonidas' claim was his marriage to Gorgo. So Gorgo may not have ascended the throne herself, but she helped her husband do so.

Gorgo's husband Leonidas was king in the decade between 490 and 480 B.C. This was a time when the states of Greece faced one of their greatest crises. The Persians had crushed the rebellion of the Ionian states by 494, and they then began to consider moving further to the west and expanding their empire across the Aegean Sea to the Balkan peninsula. A preliminary invasion force had been sent to Greece in 490 and turned back by the Athenians at the great battle of Marathon. A far greater force was mobilized a few years later and led by the Persian king Xerxes. This expedition set out in 481, and posed perhaps the greatest threat the Greeks ever faced.

Another anecdote of Gorgo's intelligence and perceptive ability appears in the context of the prelude to Xerxes' invasion. An exiled Spartan by the name of Demaratos was living at the court of Xerxes at the time, and, while he harboured some hostility toward his homeland, he nevertheless decided to send a warning to Sparta to prepare for the invasion. As all the roads were watched and he was afraid of his message being intercepted he decided on a foolproof approach. Instead of inscribing his message on the wax coating of a wooden writing tablet, he scraped the wax off, wrote on the wood underneath, and covered it with wax again, leaving a smooth blank surface. The trick worked perfectly. The couriers appeared to be carrying an empty tablet. Unfortunately, Demaratos failed to send instructions along with the tablet. When it arrived in Sparta there was no one to explain what to do with it. The Spartans, including presumably King Leonidas, puzzled over it for some time, but were unable to work out the riddle. Then Gorgo stepped in with her usual ability to see through a problem. The youthful queen (probably in her mid-twenties at the time) suggested that the wax be scraped off the tablet, and a message would undoubtedly appear underneath. Her suggestion was carried out, and the Spartans were warned of the impending invasion.

When Xerxes did invade Greece in 480, Sparta, along with Athens, led the other Greeks in resisting the Persians. Not all the Greeks had been able to withstand the advance of the vast expeditionary force. Xerxes had invaded from the north, and city after city was compelled to submit to him without a fight. It was not until he reached central Greece that he met even temporary resistance of any significance. There, at a narrow mountain pass called Thermopylae,

the Spartan king Leonidas, with 300 of the top-notch Spartiate warriors and a small force of allies, chose to make a stand against the invading Persians. The story of Thermopylae became legendary not only at Sparta, but among the rest of the Greeks, and has survived for thousands of years: how Leonidas and his troops held back the invading barbarian hordes successfully, until a Greek traitor showed the Persians a hidden path whereby they could attack the Spartans from behind; how the Spartans still fought on, even when they knew they were betrayed and doomed; how Leonidas deliberately sacrificed his own life in accordance with an oracle which demanded the death of a Spartan king in order that Sparta be saved; and how at the last the few remaining defenders, having lost their weapons, fought with nails and teeth until they too were finally overwhelmed.

Virtually nothing other than his last stand at Thermopylae is known of Leonidas' reign. The story was so glorious, and reached such epic proportions in the telling and retelling, that anything else he might have achieved during his reign has faded in comparison. Thermopylae and the Spartan king who led the defense there came to be looked upon as the true epitome of Spartan valour, a glorious affair, even if in real terms the battle itself was a military defeat.

But Gorgo was left a widow by the battle at Thermopylae. She was now about 27 or 28 years old, still marriageable and certainly capable of bearing children, that supreme task for a Spartan woman. Indeed, according to another anecdote, this was her husband's last injunction to her: as Leonidas was leaving for Thermopylae, Gorgo urged him to show himself worthy of Sparta, and asked him what she should do for her part in the cause. "Marry a good man," Leonidas is said to have instructed her, "and bear good children."

So did Gorgo marry again after her husband's death? We have no way of knowing. But she did bear at least one child for Sparta, Leonidas' son Pleistarchos. He was apparently the only son, and it has been conjectured that he was born relatively early in the marriage, even as early as 490, which would have made him 10 years old when his father died. But Gorgo's first children might have been daughters (we saw in her own case how daughters can be invisible), or she might have had children who died, or she may simply not have become pregnant until several years into the marriage. The evidence suggests that Pleistarchos, far from being born as early as 490, was probably not born until around the time of Leonidas' death. He may even have been born several months posthumously, which means Gorgo would have been left not only a widow but a pregnant one at the time of Thermopylae.

We hear nothing of Gorgo after her husband's death. An intelligent and forceful woman she may have been, but even so she would have needed a man to whom she could be some kind of partner, as she had been to her husband and her father. Under the right circumstances, Spartan women were held to have a great deal of influence with their men. The potential influence of a woman like Gorgo is illustrated by yet another anecdote about her. An Athenian woman supposedly asked her once, "Why is it that you Spartan women are the only ones who can rule men?" Gorgo's response was "Because we are also the only ones who give birth to men." The story by itself is a witty and snobbish anecdote attesting to the reputation of Spartan women as the mothers of warriors. But it also illustrates the kind of power a Spartan woman, especially a royal one, might have, particularly in contrast to other Greek women.

But in order for Gorgo to "rule" men (an exaggeration of course, even for a woman of her supposed abilities), she would have needed a man to rule. As of 480 B.C. she was the mother of the king, but Pleistarchos was only an infant (at most a young boy), and the real royal power for now lay with the chief regent, Pleistarchos' cousin Pausanias. Pleistarchos was officially the king, but a king in his minority is rarely effective. He survived to reach the age of majority, but died shortly thereafter, in 458 B.C. Like his grandfather Cleomenes before him, Pleistarchos died "childless", and this was the end of the line of Gorgo. As for Gorgo herself, did she ever remarry? What was her relationship with her youthful son the king? When did she die? We simply don't know.

In conclusion, it should be pointed out that not all of the anecdotes above are exact and faithful accounts of real incidents in Gorgo's life. Rather, many of them are brief and quite typical tales which serve to illustrate common Spartan virtues, especially female ones. Hence we find the same kind of stories attached to other Spartan women. But the number of anecdotes told about Gorgo far surpasses the number attached to any other one woman (and some stories of course are peculiarly her own). Why were stories like this attached to her in particular? It can't be only because she was the daughter of Cleomenes and the wife of Leonidas. Cleomenes, for all his talent, had a far from spotless reputation among the Spartans (witness the story of his end), and while Leonidas was remembered as a great hero, Sparta did have other heroes as well. As far as we know, Gorgo was not even the mother of great warriors and kings, since her son died shortly after reaching the age of majority, and apparently without accomplishing anything noteworthy. Bearing male children to serve the state was the chief pride of Spartan women, but Gorgo must have been glorified for other reasons than being merely

the daughter, wife and mother of kings. It was her own innate quality of intelligence which was remembered and talked of, probably within her own lifetime and certainly for centuries after her death.