Spartan Queen, Cryptologist, or Femme Fatale? Gorgo in Literature and Film

Citing Herodotus in his book *The Code Breakers*, David Kane credits Gorgo, daughter of Cleomenes and wife of Leonidas, with being the first female code breaker in history. The story to which he refers is found at Herodotus’ *Histories* 7.239.4 in which the exiled Spartan king Damaratus sends a message to the Lacedaemonians warning them of Xerxes’ resolve to invade Hellas. Fearing that such a warning written on a tablet might be intercepted and consequently his true loyalty discovered, Damaratus instead cleverly inscribed the message on the actual wood and covered it with wax. When the wax tablet arrived in Sparta, the men attempted to decipher its meaning but were at a loss since the tablet appeared blank. Herodotus tells us that Gorgo, Queen of Sparta, instructed the men to scrape off the wax to uncover the true message. Although this story is located at the end of Book 7 almost as if an afterthought, Gorgo should be credited as one of the great masterminds in unifying the Greeks against the Persians.

But this is not the only tale from the *Histories* in which Herodotus presents Gorgo as a wise and clever advisor. At *Histories* 5.51.2, a young Gorgo advises her father to refuse the bribes offered by Aristagoras, tyrant of Miletus, as he attempts to secure Spartan aid for what will become the unsuccessful Ionian Revolt. Additionally, although written much later, Plutarch attributes a number of sayings by Gorgo at *Moralia* 227E and 240E. Here, too, Gorgo is portrayed as outspoken, clever, and possessing the characteristic Laconic wit. One such example is the now famous line of inquiry posed by an Athenian woman as to why only Spartan women rule over their men. Gorgo is said to have answered that only Spartan women gave birth to real men.

While only a handful of anecdotes are attributed to Gorgo from antiquity, filmmakers have not let this relative dearth of historical information limit their portrayal of Gorgo. With a good deal of artistic license, they have developed the character of Gorgo into a headstrong, passionate, and strong-willed character. While Queen Gorgo in *The 300 Spartans* (1961), played by Anna Synodinou, at first glance seems to be little more than a loving and obedient wife, especially when compared to Lena Headey’s passionate and outspoken portrayal of the Queen in *300* (2007), I would argue that the 1961 Gorgo is equally powerful and crucial to the story as is her 2007 counterpart. In fact, she may be far closer to what the textual sources purport.

After a careful analyses of both the portrayal of Gorgo in Herodotus and of Spartan women in general in Plutarch, I will analyze the character of Gorgo as represented in each of the two films and provide some rationale and explanation as to the choices each film/director made in their depiction of Gorgo. Additionally, as more and more students are drawn to classes on ancient Greek history, women in antiquity, and similar courses because of the success and popularity of films such as *300*, I will offer suggestions on how the Spartan Queen represented in each of these films might best be used in the classroom as a conduit for discussing the role of women in antiquity. Finally, I will offer some suggestions on how we might best utilize these films (for better or for worse) as a means to engage our students with primary sources and stress the importance and limitations of textual evidence.

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