



0. GORGO - Story Preface
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As Leonidas (Gerard Butler) leaves Sparta, with the 300, he says good-bye to his son Pleistarchos (Giovanni Antonio Cimmino) and his wife Gorgo (Lena Headey). He and his men are heading north, to Thermopylae, where they will confront Xerxes and his Immortals. Still shot from the film "300," copyright, Warner Bros. Pictures, Legendary Pictures and Virtual Studios, all rights reserved. Image provided here as fair use for educational purposes and to acquaint new viewers with the film. Click on the image for a better view.

In ancient Greece, where communication between spies and their home base took time, how did Sparta realize that Xerxes was launching an invasion? According to Herodotus, Demaratos sent a hidden message to his former city:

The Lacedaemonians [Spartans] were the first of the Greeks to hear of the king's design against their country; and it was at this time that they sent to consult the Delphic oracle . . . The discovery was made to them in a very strange way.

Demaratus . . . was at Susa at the time when Xerxes determined to lead his army into Greece . . . and . . . [Demaratus] resolved to send tidings of it to Sparta. So as there was no other way of effecting his purpose, since the danger of being discovered was great, Demaratus framed the following contrivance.

He took a pair of tablets, and, clearing the wax away from them, wrote what the king was purposing to do upon the wood whereof the tablets were made; having done this, he spread the wax once more over the writing, and so sent it. By these means, the guards placed to watch the roads, observing nothing but a blank tablet, were sure to give no trouble to the bearer. (Herodotus, Histories, 7.239)

Traveling incognito, the message arrived in Sparta. No one suspected something so important was hidden in the tablet until Queen Gorgo, the wife of Leonidas, had a suggestion:

When the tablet reached Lacedaemon, there was no one, I understand, who could find out the secret, till Gorgo, the daughter of Cleomenes and wife of Leonidas, discovered it, and told the others. "If they would scrape the wax off the tablet," she said, "they would be sure to find the writing upon the wood."

The Lacedaemonians took her advice, found the writing, and read it; after which they sent it round to the other Greeks. (Herodotus, Histories, 7.239)

Gorgo, thus, was instrumental in alerting the Greeks about the approaching invasion.

We know of at least two additional stories, from antiquity, about Gorgo. The first, quoted by Paul Cartledge in *Thermopylae*, goes to the strength of Spartan women generally:

... Gorgo ... was once allegedly asked by a critical - or envious - non-Spartan woman, "Why is it that you Spartan women alone rule over your men?" Gorgo adroitly evaded the question and shot back, "Because we Spartan women are the only women who give birth to [real] men!" (Cartledge, Thermopylae, page 133)

The next anecdote takes place as Leonidas is leaving Sparta for Thermopylae. Believing she will never see her husband again, Gorgo asks him what she should do. Plutarch - writing hundreds of years later - has the king tell

his queen:

Marry good men and give birth to good children. (Plutarch on Sparta, page 146)

On the subject of "good men" ... the Sparta of Leonidas and Gorgo may have had a link to Perseus, the mythical son of Zeus (and a mortal mother) who famously severed the head of Medusa (a Gorgon). That severed head became a perfect weapon for Perseus because it turned everyone who looked at it into stone.

His link to Sparta goes back to ancient times:

In 366 BC Isocrates referred to the Spartan claim to be overlords of Argos on the basis that they were the sole surviving descendants of Perseus... (*Perseus*, a scholarly work by Dan Ogden, at [page 108.](#))

Whether Leonidas believed Sparta had a link to Perseus, one of the greatest heroes in Greek mythology, is unknown. What we do know, is Leonidas was a hero in his own right.

Scholars believe he was about fifty years old at the time of the Persian threat. His opponent, Xerxes, was approximately 39.

See [Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:](#)

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/GORGO-300-Battle-of-Thermopylae>

See [Learning Tasks for this story online at:](#)

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/GORGO-300-Battle-of-Thermopylae>

Questions 2 Ponder

Would Demaratus Have Been Better-off with Social Media?

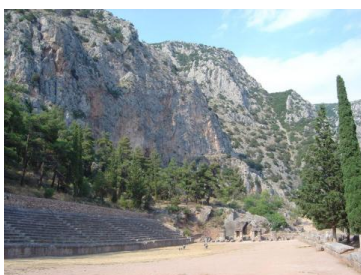
For purposes of warning Sparta about the upcoming attack by Xerxes, would Demaratus—the person who issued the alert—have been better-off if he'd had "social media" in his day and age?

Is “Spying” Helped or Hindered by the Internet?

During the days of ancient Greece, it took a very long time for word to spread about events, like a Persian invasion led by Xerxes, the Great King. In today's world, news travels at the speed of a click on a computer keyboard.

Is the job of "spying" helped or hindered by the communicating power of the Internet? Explain your answer.

Media Stream



Delphi - Place to Consult the Oracle

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Principal Religious Sanctuaries in Ancient Greece

Image of map online, courtesy Perry Casteñada Map Collection, University of Texas at Austin.

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GORGO

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Perseus - Clash of the Titans

Clip from "The Storyteller: Greek Myths," *Perseus & the Gorgon* (1991). Online, via YouTube. Copyright, Sony Studios, all rights reserved. Clip provided here as fair use for educational purposes and to acquaint new viewers with the 1991 production.

Creator:

Jim Henson

Director:

David Garfath

Writers:

Anthony Minghella (creator) and
Nigel Williams (screenplay)

From a U.K. television series:

"The Storyteller: Greek Myths" (1990)

Original Air Date:

December 8, 1991 (Season 1, Episode 2)

Cast:

Michael Gambon - The Storyteller

Brian Henson - The Dog (voice)

Jeremy Gilley - Perseus

Frances Barber - Medusa

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Perseus-Clash-of-the-Titans>

Perseus - Severs the Head of Medusa

Clip from "The Storyteller: Greek Myths," *Perseus & the Gorgon* (1991). Online, via YouTube. Copyright, Sony Studios, all rights reserved. Clip provided here as fair use for educational purposes and to acquaint new viewers with the 1991 production.

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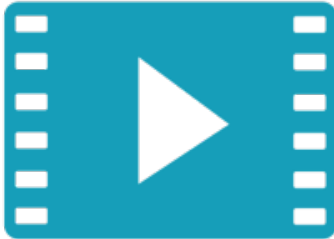
Brian Henson - The Dog (voice)

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Perseus - Son of Zeus

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