

**LINGUISTIC ASPECTS OF THE IMAGE OF SPARTAN KING LEONIDAS IN THE CULTURE OF THE EARLY MODERN PERIODS**

***ASPECTOS LINGÜÍSTICOS DA IMAGEM DO REI ESPARTANO LEONIDAS NA CULTURA DOS PRIMEIROS PERÍODOS MODERNOS***

***ASPECTOS LINGÜÍSTICOS DE LA IMAGEN DEL REY SPARTAN LEONIDAS EN LA CULTURA DE LOS PRIMEROS PERÍODOS MODERNOS***

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**ABSTRACT:** The article aims to study the linguistic aspects of the history in European culture through the example of the life and image of Spartan king Leonidas. To meet the aim of the study, the methods applied to the given issue is through culture, language, and history, through the key concept of social and cultural reception of the antiquity. The image of King Leonidas in the European culture is determined by social and cultural conditions in which the need for refreshing the events of the Vth century B.C. has appeared. Anti-tyrannical ideas and the cult of freedom as opposed to slavery inspired the artists of XVII XVIII. centuries. The image of king Leonidas is present in the European culture and linguistic characteristics at the end of the XIX and the first half of the XX centuries revived due to world wars.

**Keywords:** History. Reception studies. European culture. Linguistic aspects.

**RESUMO:** *O artigo tem como objetivo estudar os aspectos lingüísticos da história da cultura europeia a partir do exemplo da vida e da imagem do rei espartano Leônidas. Para atender ao objetivo do estudo, os métodos aplicados à questão em questão são por meio da cultura, da língua e da história, por meio do conceito-chave de recepção social e cultural da antiguidade. A imagem do rei Leônidas na cultura europeia é determinada pelas condições sociais e culturais em que a necessidade de refrescar os acontecimentos do século V a.C. apareceu. Ideias anti-tirânicas e o culto da liberdade em oposição à escravidão inspiraram os artistas dos séculos XVII XVIII. séculos. A imagem do rei Leônidas está presente na cultura e nas características lingüísticas europeias do final do século XIX e da primeira metade do século XX revivida devido às guerras mundiais.*

**Palavras-chave:** *História. Estudos de recepção. Cultura europeia. Aspectos lingüísticos.*

**RESUMEN:** *El artículo tiene como objetivo estudiar los aspectos lingüísticos de la historia en la cultura europea a través del ejemplo de la vida y la imagen del rey espartano Leonidas. Para cumplir con el objetivo del estudio, los métodos aplicados al tema en cuestión es a través de la cultura, el lenguaje y la historia, a través del concepto clave de recepción social y cultural de la antigüedad. La imagen del rey Leónidas en la cultura europea está determinada por las condiciones sociales y culturales en las que*

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*surge la necesidad de refrescar los acontecimientos del siglo V a.C. ha aparecido. Las ideas antitiránicas y el culto a la libertad frente a la esclavitud inspiraron a los artistas del XVII XVIII. siglos. La imagen del rey Leónidas está presente en la cultura europea y en las características lingüísticas de finales del siglo XIX y la primera mitad del siglo XX revividas debido a las guerras mundiales.*

**Palabras clave:** *Historia. Estudios de acogida. Cultura europea. Aspectos lingüísticos.*

## **Introduction**

The image of King Leonidas was formed in antiquity, first of all, through the facts Herodotus left us. But they include all the representations of the Spartan king that used to exist in the cultures of the following periods (Bayliss, 2020).

Firstly, it is the description of Leonidas's life (biographical information) - his birth, information about his ancestors, some ups and downs of his life, his heroic deed, death, and his compatriots' remembrance (Calame, 2017).

Secondly, it is the symbolic meaning of the image of Leonidas reflecting the Spartans' (or in general, the Greeks') system of values, their concept of Greek military virtue that showed up in the battle of Thermopylae; and the description of the enemy, the Persians, and Xerxes in particular, as a civilizational counterbalance (Saado, 2020).

Plutarch criticizes Herodotus in his famous work "Of the Malice of Herodotus" showing the distorted image of Leonidas, as Herodotus did it "...bearing ill-will and being unjust to some." (XXXII, 866d). Pausanias in his "Description of Greece" does not describe Leonidas's life and heroic deed in detail, but it is him who creates the character to become generally accepted in the European culture. That image turned to be the blueprint of the Spartan myth. The political history of this myth was studied in detail by Yoann le Tallec (Christien & Le

Tallec, 2013). However, the only fundamental work about King Leonidas puts forward the cultural and historical aspect rather than the political side.

## **Methods**

The paper is the cross-disciplinary research of the antique heritage, specifically, it is based on the cultural and historical approach to history. The key methods bring together traditional views on history (historical critical method) and those from the point of view of social and cultural reception supposing a direct connection of historical representations and social and cultural context of the epoch.

## Results and Discussion

Herodotus in description of Leonidas's life did not find the fact of birth from a certain mother and father the most important fact (Hdt. V, 41), but recounted Leonidas's ancestors, saying that "the one to whom all especially looked up, and who had the command of the entire force, was the Lacedaemonian," the descendant of Hercules (Hdt. VII, 204). Wishing or not, Herodotus states here the glorification of Leonidas in keeping with mythological traditions. Well, yes, he is not the son of a god and a mortal man but he is the descendant of the hero, if not his specific epiclesis.

Further on Herodotus rarely mentions Leonidas as a personage, "He had now come to Thermopylae, accompanied by the three hundred men which the law assigned him, whom he had himself chosen from

among the citizens, and who were all of them fathers with sons living. On his way he had taken the troops from thebes... the reason why he made a point of taking troops from Thebes, and Thebes only, was that the Thebans were strongly suspected of being well inclined to the Medes." (Hdt. VII, 205). Or Thermopylae: "Leonidas ... gave his voice for remaining where they were, while they sent envoys to the several cities to ask for help..." (Hdt. VII, 207). The image of Leonidas appears the most vivid in his last battle as described by Herodotus, "the Greeks under Leonidas, as they now went forth determined to die, advanced much further than on previous days, until they reached the more open portion of the pass. ...Now they joined battle beyond the defile, and carried slaughter among the barbarians, who fell in heaps. ... For the Greeks, reckless of their own safety and desperate ... exerted themselves with the most furious valour against the barbarians" (Hdt. VII, 223). "...and here, as they strove, Leonidas fell fighting bravely, together with many other famous Spartans." (Hdt. VII, 224). And finally, Herodotus shows the Spartans' attempt to protect dead Leonidas's body (Hdt. VII, 225) and the corpse abuse organized by Xerxes, whose violence he explains as follows, "King Xerxes was more angry with Leonidas, while he was still in life, than with any other mortal. Certes, he would not else have used his body so shamefully." (Hdt. VII, 238). Meanwhile, the translator and commentator of Herodotus Georgy Stratanovsky suggest his own explanation of this violence – it is the way how rebels having dared to take against the ruling king were punished in Persia.

Then we mainly meet indirect reference to Leonidas as the one to fulfill somebody's will, Gods' will, for example. Herodotus also introduced auspex Megistias, who told Leonidas's fortune (Hdt. VII, 221), the oracle, who to save Sparta predicted the

lacerating of the king “the descendant of great Heracles” “He cannot be withstood by the courage of bulls nor of lions, Strive as they may...”

Leonidas convincingly demonstrates Demaratus’s claim addressed to Xerxes, “Thou hast now to deal with the first kingdom and town in Greece, and with the bravest men.” Xerxes moreover knew in advance who he was dealing with “He had heard, before he came out of Thessaly, that a few men were assembled at this place, and that at their head were certain Lacedaemonians, under Leonidas, a descendant of Hercules.” (Hdt. VII, 208). Herodotus shows the Xerxes’s impressions of what was happening, his 4-day waiting for the Spartans to turn their backs “thinking that their firm stand was mere impudence and recklessness.” (Hdt. VII, 210), but in the first fight “In

this way it became clear to all, and especially to the king, that though he had plenty of combatants, he had but very few warriors.” (Hdt. VII, 210). In the next battle with the "Immortals" joining, even the numerical superiority could not help the Persians, however the Spartans kept the tactics of pretended step-back, but “...the Spartans at their approach would wheel round and face their pursuers, in this way destroying vast numbers of the enemy.” (Hdt. VII, 210). It should be emphasized that in the works of art this tactic is presented as personified and coming from Leonidas.

Herodotus sometimes suggests several versions of the events, the role of Leonidas to be presented in different ways. When it was borne in that the Persians were passing over the Hellenes and everybody in the pass was to die, “Then the Greeks held a council to consider what they should do, and here opinions were divided...”, as a result a part of the troops went away (Hdt. VII, 219). Herodotus, however, sticks to another idea that Leonidas “... commanded them to retreat, but said that he himself could not draw back with honour” (Hdt. VII, 220). And further on, “For my own part, I incline to think that Leonidas gave the order, because he perceived the allies to be out of heart and unwilling to encounter the danger to which his own mind was made up. He therefore commanded them to retreat, but said that he himself could not draw back with honour; knowing that, if he stayed, glory awaited him, and that Sparta in that case would not lose her prosperity.”, as Pythoness predicted. (Hdt. VII, 220). Herodotus brings in one more argument for his explanation, that “... the allies, when Leonidas ordered them to retire, obeyed him and forthwith departed.” (Hdt. VII, 222), because of his “... wish to secure the whole glory for the Spartans...” (Hdt. VII, 220).

We see that Herodotus endues the character of Leonidas with a certain diversity, particularly through must-have-beens and interpretation of existing facts. That is why

Plutarch criticizes Herodotus in his famous work "Of the Malice of Herodotus" where we meet the character of Leonidas. Plutarch promises to include into Leonidas's biography "... other acts and sayings of the Spartans Herodotus has omitted; we will write in the life of Leonidas..." "...Herodotus in his narration... hath obscured also the bravest act of Leonidas ..." (XXXII, 866a-b). Plutarch announces a lie Herodotus's statement that the Thebans backstabbed the Greeks' interest in their struggle with the Persians so Leonidas did not let them leave Thermopylae as the rest of the army but made them fight as hostages. (XXXI, 865c). It is a great surprise for Plutarch how Herodotus

explained the fact of Leonidas sending away his allies not to have them sharing other Greeks' glory. "For it had certainly been the height of folly to keep his enemies against their wills, to be partakers of that glory from which he drove away his confederates. But it is manifest from the effects, that Leonidas suspected not the Thebans of insincerity, but esteemed them to be his steadfast friends." (XXXI, 865e). It turned to be, Plutarch says, "For belike not only Xerxes, but Leonidas also, had whipsters following his camp, by whom the Thebans were scourged and forced against their wills to fight." (XXXIII, 866d). To demonstrate what Herodotus did not take into consideration, Plutarch describes funeral spectacles having been held before Leonidas left Sparta and cites his respond to the comment that he was taking too few people "There are many to die there." (XXXII, 866b). There is also the last wish to his wife "I command you to marry a good man, and bring him good children." (XXXII, 866b-c), and the refuse of two allies to leave the army to take a letter to Sparta. "Who would not have blamed another that should have omitted these things?" But not Herodotus, as he did it "...bearing ill-will and being unjust to some." (XXXII, 866d).

Pausanias in his "Description of Greece" does not describe Leonidas's life and heroic deed in detail, but it is him who creates the character to become generally accepted and even a stereotype. Pausanias writes that "Many battles, indeed, have taken place among the Greeks, and many among the Barbarians; but those are but few in number, in which the virtue of one man shone forth in an eminent degree, as of Achilles in the Trojan war, and of Miltiades at Marathon. In my opinion, however, the illustrious action of Leonidas surpasses those of any other period." (III, 4, 7-8).

Since Renaissance and early modern period the image of king Leonidas has been referred to due to social and cultural necessity to bring the events of the 5th century BC up to date.

Michel de Montaigne, a philosopher and thinker who founded the essay genre in

the world literature, alludes king Leonidas in one of his essays “Of Cannibals”. The author of “Of Experience” (1580) provides the numerous cannibalism examples with a skeptical gnome “We should be similarly wary of accepting common opinions; we should judge them by the ways of reason not by popular vote” (Montaigne, 1992). Along with it he comes to two more ideas “...the most valiant are sometimes the most unfortunate. There are defeats more triumphant than victories” (Montaigne,

1992). They are well illustrated by the contrast of four great Greek victories in the Greek and Persian wars, they are the ones at Salamis, at Plataea, at Mykalessos, and in Sicily. “Never could those four sister victories, the fairest the sun ever be held... venture to oppose all their united glories, to the single glory of the discomfiture of King Leonidas and his men, at the pass of Thermopylae” (Montaigne, 1992). Thus, de Montaigne goes against his skepticism, and embraces and reproduces that image of the Spartan king generally accepted since antiquity and stereotyped.

A unique example of the image of king Leonidas is offered by the French writer, bishop and professor François Fénelon. In the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century he wrote his “Dialogues of the Dead” (1700-1717). The forms and ways of state governing are shown there through imaginary satirical dialogues of outstanding mythic heroes, historical characters from the ancient period to his times. One of the dialogues, dialogue number 10, belongs to Xerxes and Leonidas and is held on the banks of the Styx. Its gist is in the initial gnome, “This wisdom and valour that makes a state invincible, and not the number of subjects, or the unlimited authority of the princes”. Leonidas emphasizes that unlike the Persian king he is not pleased to meet and believes Xerxes should better stay with his subjects, slaves and flagellates, rather than with the king serving the truth and law. The rest of the dialogue unmasks the despotic regime of the Persian king whereas Leonidas comes across as an altruistic leader (all satraps of the Persian king were rolling in money, as also mentioned by Xerxes in the dialogue) and talented captain, recognized so even by his enemy.

It is notable that there is a poem “Leonidas” (1737) (Glover, 1882) in the legacy of Richard Glover, an outstanding English poet, writer, and politician. (1737) (Glover, 1882). It consists a vivid description of the defense of Thermopylae by the Greeks led by Leonidas. Glover takes ancient authors – Herodotus, Plutarch, Pausanias, as a basis for his work, describing their narrations in detail in the foreword (Glover, 1882). The poem brightly shows laconophilic sentiments, the author believes the heroic deed of the Spartans and their king remains nationally memorable long after, whereas Leonidas’s

goodness is the object of admiration and praise (Glover, 1882). And finally the poem confirms the superiority of freedom over the slavery (Glover, 1882), and Leonidas explains that despite the oracle's predictions his heart is full of freedom (Glover, 1882). Let's stress here that the

antiquity here is involved into a political struggle through the presence in the English-Scottish poetry. David Mallet, its prominent representative, accepted Richard Glover's ideas during his socialization. Sadro Young, his monographist, insists that Glover's image of Leonidas should be viewed in tandem with Mallet's really anti tyrannical poem "Brute" (Jung, 2008).

Having gone through the transition from neoclassicism to romanticism, the European art of the early 1800s is also inspired by the image of king Leonidas as connected to the glorification of the fight for freedom. The canvas of Jacques Louis David "Leonidas at Thermopylae" (1814) is noteworthy here. Its central personage is king Leonidas, sitting on a rock, naked and armed with a sword, a spear, a big round shield, a baldric and a helmet. "Leonidas at Thermopylae" does not show the battle but a preparation to it. The key symbolic emphasis is given to several groups of characters possessing no historical credibility. Leonidas's brother Agis in a wreath becomes a symbol of warrior sacrifice. The blind hoplite Eurytus with a spear and ready to die warriors kissing women before the battle are the symbol of the mergence of military experience and youth. Two blowers above them and a warrior ready to engrave the words about the Spartans' glorious death show their readiness for the valiant end. Finally, the altar of Hercules, the ancestor of the Spartan king is also symbolic. According to David's opinion, the name of Leonidas though conquered is the only survived name, others having vanished through the history. Just before the Waterloo the symbolism of this painting seemed threatening to Napoleon patronizing David.

At the same period writers also come to Leonidas being inspired with the public sympathy to the Greek fight for the freedom. Lord Byron recollecting Hellas writes in his "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage" (1812): "Who now shall lead they scatter'd children forth,/And long accustom'd bondage uncreate?/Not such thy sons who whilome did await,/The hopeless warriors of a willing doom,/In bleak Thermopylae's sepulchral strait" (Lord Byron, 1812) and finishes with almost a rhetorical question "Oh! who that gallant spirit shall resume...?" Great Alexander Pushkin answers this question in one of his letters dated 1821. Sharing his impressions of the enthusiasm of ethnical Greeks inhabiting the south of Russia, Pushkin mentions the names of ancient and current heroes:

“The delight of minds has come to its peak, all thoughts are directed to the same subject — independence of the ancient Fatherland everywhere

crowds of Greeks, ... everyone was talking about

Leonidas, Themistocles, everybody was going to the army of fortunate Ypsilantis” (Pushkin, 1979). The association of Leonidas with Alexander Ypsilantis became the touch point in the poetry of that time. The German poet Wilhelm Müller in his poem “Leaders of the Greeks” compares Alexander Ypsilantis with Leonidas, giving the example of 300 Spartans hoping that the Greeks can win the Barbarians (Müller, 1822). He is echoed later by Victor Hugo showing the conflict of the Greeks and the Persians at a mythological level of intercivilizational opposition in his poem “The Three Hundred”.

King Xerxes having conquered everything on his way suddenly discovers that as soon as he has ripped the sea out, it has given birth to 300 Spartans, Neptune and Fortuna fighting their corner (there should be Poseidon and Tyche in their shoes): “Poseidon/ Commanded King Leonidas to avenge the offence./ And gave his blessings to defend Hellas/ Xerxes learned their virtue at Thermopylae” (Hugo, 1956).

Since the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> to the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the image of Leonidas did not appear in the European art. Everything related to Leonidas and Thermopylae in the form of “a Spartan myth” took place in political and historical practice. The political history of this myth was studied in detail by Yoann le Tallec (Christien & Le Tallec, 2013). As a kind of addition to the research of the French author I would like to mention one of a stereotypic use of the image of Leonidas in the Russian public life of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Vladimir Mayakovsky, a great futurist poet, in 1914 during World War I recollected that several years before that an artist and poet Velemir Khlebnikov had distributed the proclamation devoted to the fight “between all the germanism and slavdom” addressed to his compatriots” ‘they say the Hellenes’ spirit has come to life within the modern Slavic people, and very soon Darius and Leonidas with his 300 warriors will raise in front of the astonished public” (Mayakovsky, 1978).

In contrast, in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the image of the king Leonidas meets entirely entertaininh aims. A monument raised in 1955 at the site of the Spartans and Persians battle became a kind of a symbol of a new non-politicized interest to the image of king Leonidas. The king embodies military heroism and bears didactic meaning, like in the novel of Valerio Manfredi “Lo Scudo di Talos” (1988), a fictionalized story of the Thermopylae events. Leonidas is not the centre of the narration. In the author’s afterword



Manfredi says, “I was inspired by the story of two warriors having survived after the terrible battle of the

300 Spartans at Thermopylae”, whereas the main character of the novel a helot boy Talos “is a purely fictitious personage”. In fact, we get the image of the Spartan king Leonidas as viewed by this boy or shown in the author’s notes.

Talos comes to Sparta when the whole city is celebrating a new king coming to the throne – Leonidas, the son of Anaxandridas, the descendant of Hercules (Manfredi, 1988). And when ephors and fathers allowed Leonidas to take only 300 Spartans to Thermopylae, he personally selected warriors to join him.

Recollecting the depersonalized Herodotus’s description of Leonidas’s troop’s attack, let’s see how the novelist shows it: “Leonidas suddenly gave a command to drop back... Having seen that the Persian commander ...gave the order to attack again... It was exactly what Leonidas was reckoning on; when his warriors reached the wall, they unexpectedly turned round and broke upon the enemy in well-organized lines forming a new line of the fight. The Persians attacked chaotically and unadvised being cut into pieces. In that hell of dust and blood a blind wall of warriors headed by Leonidas was forging ahead crashing everything on their way.”

The author also suggests Talos’s impression of the battle. And the writer seems to modernize the historical reality, ascribing the young helot the idea of a battle for the freedom of many peoples. The novelist makes the image of Leonidas more tragic; we see the blooded king, victoriously greeting his warriors after the enemy attack has been held, but he does not know yet that his “fate is determined as the government will never and not for everything withdraw the troops from the Isthmus of Corinth”. But when he gets Themistocles’s direct message about it and a suggestion that he and his compatriots should leave, he calmly responds, “We cannot obey the received commands. We will fight till we totally lose any force, then we should die honorably as the warriors should do.” The image of Leonidas as a warrior dominates in Manfredi’s work. It is the image of a hero, a leader: “King Leonidas rushed aroar like a bear with a sore head, with the 300 hundred irenes behind him...”. He tried to break through the Persian troops to destroy Xerxes. He was almost a success in it. “Shocked Xerxes gave the command to drop back”. The novelist provides a vivid description of the last fight, everything is concentrated around Leonidas and

obeys to him. The image becomes mature and glorious. The tragic and the heroic interlace in it, complementing each other, describing the death of Leonidas and his

warriors "...Having survived, exhausted and wounded warriors were holding their shields high above to protect the dying king till they all fell down on the blood-soaked ground".

Showing Leonidas at Thermopylae, the author of the novel can't help stressing "the distortion of the Spartan society", the fact that its key principle the "the state is above any of its citizens" has been extremely exaggerated and is inadequate for the present. Though he suggests a milder version: «жертвовать жизнью отдельного человека ради выживания всего сообщества». Let's add - voluntarily sacrifice one's life. In this case the last line of the novel fully meets the didactic goals the author set, wishing or not "Such behavior is still called heroism today".

The heroic image of Leonidas is the central image of the film "The 300 Spartans" (1962, directed by Rudolph Maté). The plot is totally concentrated on the actions of Leonidas and his opposition to Darius. Thus, the first Persian attack with foot troops and hidden cavalry has been compromised by Leonidas's decision to have the cavalry between two lines of Spartans and attack from the rear. The Persians take flight. It is a very demonstrative episode when Leonidas refuses to hand over to survive, it will later appear in a comic and in a new film. The Spartans also defeat the attack of the Persians' carts and "Immortals", Xerxes' lifeguard. Ephialtes' betrayal makes Leonidas fight at two lines. He orders the troops of other cities and Themistocles's fleet to leave and leads the Spartans into an attack to kill Xerxes but dies right in front of his cart. The Spartans carry his body, refusing to exchange it for life and die of the Persian arrows.

The outline of events is similar to the one of Herodotus; however, to add a certain dramatical effect there are several scenes emphasized to show Leonidas's personal features and captainship. He is no doubt the main character, though the film is entitled "The 300 Spartans". 40-year old Richard Egan matches well with his physicality (by that moment he has been doing martial arts for 20 years) and war experience in World War II where he went voluntary after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. The image of Leonidas has turned out convincing and historically and mythologically true.

The comic "300" of Frank Miller and the films of Zack Snyder (2006) and Noam Murro (2014) based on

it pursue nothing but entertaining aims. Leonidas is a stereotype personage there, created by the authors and inserted into the created context without any historical credibility.

## **Conclusion**

To summarize, the image of king Leonidas is updated in the European culture under social and cultural conditions as well as personal demands and aspiration for personal fulfillment of an artist interpreting the antique image. The perception of this image as a hero by the European public collective consciousness remains constant.

The reception of the image of King Leonidas usually touches upon one and the same episode of the Greek and Persian wars, that is the battle of Thermopylae. Whereas the story about the deeds of Leonidas as a warrior-king is always based on the same antique sources, every address to it bears a separate meaning. However, the term of moral victory of the Greek still dominates in the perception of the battle and the evaluation of Leonidas. To summarize, the image of king Leonidas is updated in the European culture under social and cultural conditions as well as personal demands and aspiration for personal fulfillment of an artist interpreting the antique image. The perception of this image as a hero by the European public collective consciousness remains constant. We can rightfully declare that together with the evolution of the representation of Leonidas, the historical image of this Spartan warrior-king as proposed in antique sources, has transformed into a symbol image.

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