

Amazons

A large number of ancient writers tell us about a race of warrior women called Amazons, who lived without men, wore masculine clothing and took part in activities – hunting, farming and, above all, fighting – which among Greeks were normally exclusive to males. The Amazons are placed in a variety of geographical locations, but the one mentioned most frequently is the area bordering on the south-eastern shore of the Black Sea (in present-day northern Turkey), around the city of Themiscyra and the river Thermodon. According to one ancient historian, Diodorus Siculus (3.52–5), there was also an earlier race of Amazons who were natives of Libya in North Africa.

The era when the Amazons are supposed to have lived also varies a great deal, but most commonly they are assigned to the period before and during the Trojan War, that is, to a time at least five hundred years before the earliest reference to them, which is in Homer's *Iliad*. For most writers, then, the Amazons are a phenomenon of the distant past, and no author claims ever to have seen them, or even to have met anyone who has seen them. In *Airs, waters, places*, a treatise ascribed to the fifth-century physician Hippocrates, some Amazon-type characteristics are attributed to the warrior women of the Sauromatians, a nomadic tribe who in the Classical Age inhabited territory in southern Russia to the east of the River Don. But the author is not describing a race of women living apart from men, and he himself does not refer to them as Amazons. The geographer Strabo in the first century BC mentions stories about Amazons which were current in his own time, but is clearly not inclined to believe them himself.

Only one set of narratives places the Amazon story in a specific historical context, that of the late fourth century BC. Several writers refer to a tale about a meeting between Alexander the Great and a troop of Amazons, under their queen Thalestris, in the far north of the Persian Empire.¹ The historian Arrian gives a slightly different version, referring to a story that Alexander received from the governor of Media a gift of a hundred armed and mounted women, whom the governor called Amazons; the

circumspect conqueror at once dismissed them, fearing that his troops would not treat them with much respect, but promised that one day he would visit their queen and make her pregnant (Arrian, 7.13). The episode is not given much credence by the majority of the authors mentioning it: Arrian says that it is not included in the most reliable sources for Alexander's life, and that he himself doubts whether Amazons still existed at that time.

Amazonian customs receive a great deal of attention from ancient authors, as well they might. Strabo says that in order to reproduce themselves, the Amazons set aside two months every year for visits to the mountainous area on the border between their own country and that of the Gargarians. The men from the other side of the border made their way to the same region, and sexual intercourse took place in the dark, and at random. At certain fixed times, then, the Amazons' total rejection of men gave way to participation in promiscuous sexual relationships. If the babies which were born as a result were female, they were kept by the Amazons; if they were male, they were handed over to the Gargarians (Strabo, 11.5.1). A number of writers tell us that the right breasts of the girls were either cut off or seared with red-hot bronze instruments when they were infants: this was done to prevent them getting in the way during their later careers as fighters.² According to the author of *Airs, waters, places*,³ this was also the custom among Sauromatian women, and had the effect of diverting all the strength and bulk to the right shoulder and arm, which wielded weapons. But the idea that the Amazons lacked one breast must have become popular at quite a late date, since in the numerous visual representations of them produced in the fifth century BC they are always shown with the normal two. Clearly one reason why the story caught on was that it offered an explanation (almost certainly a fanciful one) of their name: the Greek word *a-mazon* could be translated as 'without a breast'.

Needless to say, the absence of men in the Amazon community excites a great deal of comment. The fifth-century tragedian Aeschylus calls them 'man-hating' (*Prometheus Bound* 723–8) and 'manless' (*The Suppliants* 287–9). As far as Strabo is concerned, it is this feature of their way of life which makes their existence hard to credit, for 'who could believe that an army of women, or a city, or a tribe, could ever be organised without men . . . ?' (11.5.3). Not only did they manage to survive without men, but they also of course fought against them. They are 'a match for men', says Homer, who locates the Amazons in southern Asia Minor and says that the hero Bellerophon (*Iliad* 6.186) and Priam the king of Troy (*Iliad* 3.189) had both encountered them in battle. For Lysias, an Athenian orator of the Classical period, the Amazons 'seemed to surpass men in their spirit'; they also pioneered the use of iron and horses in battle, and with these assets they succeeded in enslaving their neighbours and ruling over many lands (2.4–6). The Amazons, then, reject what for a Greek was the ultimate female experience, marriage, and instead engage in the most characteristic of male activities, fighting. The reversal is emphasised by the nature of their religious practices: their favourite deities are said to have been Artemis, the virgin goddess, and the war god Ares.

According to Diodorus (2.45–6, 3.53–5), the lifestyle of both the Libyan and the Black Sea Amazons involved an inversion of normal sex-roles rather than complete separatism. In Amazon communities the women were the fighters, rulers and administrators, while the men, 'like married women in our own society' (3.53.2), looked after the home, reared the children and carried out the orders given to them by their wives. While female infants had their right breasts seared to improve their prowess as fighters, the boys were mutilated in their legs and arms so as to make them unfit for war (2.45.3). Both races of

Amazons were renowned for their military accomplishments, and succeeded in conquering large parts of Syria and Asia Minor; but eventually both were overwhelmed in battle by the Greek hero Heracles, who 'thought that it would ill accord with his resolve to be the benefactor of the whole of mankind if he should allow any race to be under the rule of women' (3.55.3).

For other ancient authors the Amazons, in spite of their separatist habits, were not immune to the lure of sexual desire. The fifth-century historian Herodotus recounts how some Amazons from Themiscyra who had been taken prisoner by a Greek force succeeded in murdering their captors while they were on board ship (4.110–18). They eventually landed on the northern shores of the Black Sea, in the territory of the people known as the Scythians, where they at once stole some horses and took up the profitable pursuit of marauding. When the Scythians at last discovered the sex of these mysterious raiders, they embarked on a deliberate campaign of seduction. A stray Amazon was waylaid by a Scythian, and readily agreed to have sex with him. On the next day they each brought along one of their friends, and before long the entire population of both camps had been brought together by this blind date process. The Amazons were nevertheless reluctant to be drawn into conventional Scythian society, since their customs were incompatible with those of the local women, and it was agreed that the couples should establish a new community to the north-east. This, according to Herodotus, was the origin of the Sauromatian race, whose women in his own day still engaged in hunting and warfare, and wore the same clothes as the men; they also had a law which forbade a woman to marry until she had killed an enemy in battle.

For Herodotus, then, the Amazons' opposition to men could be overcome by the power of sexual attraction. For others it was the force of arms which finally put paid to their unique way of life. The latter was in fact by far the more common explanation of how the Amazons eventually came to grief, and it features in some of the most prominent of their myths. At least as old as the fifth century BC⁴ is the story that Heracles, for his ninth labour, was given the job of bringing back to Greece the girdle of the Amazon queen Hippolyta. To achieve this, he and his followers fought a battle against the women warriors, in the course of which – according to some accounts – Heracles killed Hippolyta and took the girdle from her dead body.

Some of the versions of the Heracles episode relate how the hero was accompanied on this adventure by his Athenian comrade, Theseus. The latter either captured in battle, or received as a prize, or was amorously pursued by, Hippolyta's sister Antiope – the details vary from story to story, and indeed according to some narratives it was Hippolyta herself rather than Antiope who became the consort of the legendary Athenian king.⁵ But one way or another, Theseus came home with an Amazon, thereby precipitating one of the major events in Athens' mythical past. In order to free their queen (or simply, in some versions, in pursuit of their lust for conquest), the Amazons invaded Greece from the north and marched on Athens. From their base on the Areopagus hill they launched a siege of the Acropolis, which was only lifted three months later when the women's army was finally defeated by Theseus' forces.⁶

One final Amazonian exploit features the later queen Penthesilea, who after the death of Hector brought her army to Troy to help defend the city against the Greeks. The hero Achilles faced her on the battlefield, and it was only after his spear had pierced her breast that he came to realise her beauty and to fall in love with her – too late, of course (Fig. 8).⁷ Here, the two most common causes of the defeat of Amazonian resistance – physical force and love – are combined, and we encounter an analogy frequently made in Greek

myth between violent domination and the sexual act. These erotic connotations can be discerned in some of the other Amazonian episodes – Heracles captures the queen's girdle, Theseus carries off an Amazon bride – and were certainly not lost on the sculptors of the Classical Age (Fig. 10).

It is impossible to ascertain whether or not the Amazon myth had any substantial basis in reality. No archaeological evidence has been uncovered which would remotely suggest the existence, in the Bronze Age or at any later time, of a community consisting entirely of female warriors; nor are there any material remains or contemporary written records which can confirm the notion that the myth preserves a memory of a time when a matriarchal society in Asia Minor was struggling for survival in the face of the growing patriarchal dominance of the incoming Hittite peoples.⁸ At present, the most likely candidates for the role of Amazonian prototype seem to be the women of the Sauromatian race, who according to Herodotus and the author of *Airs, waters, places* (17) used before their marriages to engage in riding, hunting and fighting. Archaeological evidence provides some confirmation of these activities: a few Sauromatian female burials of the sixth to fourth centuries BC contain weapons and armour.⁹ Travellers' tales about these strange female practices may in themselves have been sufficient to give rise to Amazon myths, especially if the hearer began to speculate, as Herodotus evidently did, about the women's distant ancestors. Genuine warrior women seem often to have excited the male imagination, and it would not be surprising if some such group in the course of time had been mentally transformed into an entire race of female fighters.¹⁰

Although the origins of the Amazon myth are obscure, there is no doubting its popularity, particularly in Classical Athens: confrontations with Amazons were mentioned frequently by poets, orators and historians, and were a common theme in sculpture, frescoes and vase paintings. Presumably, then, it was a myth that meant something to the population at large; undoubtedly, it had gained a place in the official iconography of Athens, since it was chosen for depiction on some very prominent public buildings, including the Parthenon (see pp. 191, 193). When we come to consider why this high profile was accorded to the women warriors, the question of whether or not they ever existed becomes irrelevant. No-one in fifth-century Athens would have expected ever to encounter an Amazon, or would have believed that this race posed any threat to their city in real life. Nevertheless, the Amazon story seems to have been important to the Athenians.

Whatever the reason for this, we can be sure that it had nothing to do with heartwarming messages about the empowerment of women. The Amazons were outstanding fighters, and they conquered many nations, but in the end they were always beaten by Greeks – by Heracles, by Achilles or, most significantly for the Athenians, by Theseus. According to Lysias (2.4–6), their encounter with the courageous defenders of Athens brought out the Amazons' basic feminine weakness: 'they died here and paid the penalty for their folly. They made the memory of our city imperishable because of its bravery, and rendered their own country nameless because of their disaster here.' Clearly on one level the Amazon theme in Athenian art can be interpreted as a form of patriotic display. The self-glorification inspired by the myth became very pronounced after the Persian invasions of Greece in 490 and 480 BC (see p. 95). Like those other legendary foes the Trojans, the Amazons lived in an area which in the early fifth century was part of the Persian Empire, and their incursion into Greece was seen as foreshadowing the recent Persian onslaughts, which had been directed in particular at the city of Athens.¹¹

The identification between Amazons and Persians is confirmed by numerous fifth-

century Athenian vase paintings in which the women warriors are provided with Persian dress and weapons – leggings, leather caps, curved bows, axes and hide-covered shields (Fig. 11). There can be little doubt that the Amazons were favoured by Greek artists partly as an example of the ‘defeated barbarian’ type. In the sculpture which decorated Greek temples, it was customary to refrain from depicting recent historical events, for fear that the gods might be offended by human boastfulness. But myths which provided parallels to those events were quite acceptable; and this would have been one reason why the female invaders were chosen to adorn the Parthenon, the temple which was constructed to replace the one destroyed by the Persians when they sacked Athens in 480 BC. In these scenes from Athens’ heroic past there were intimations of more recent achievements.

However, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the Amazons were important to the Greeks, not simply as barbarians, but also as women. Certainly in sculpture their female characteristics are frequently on show, with one breast left exposed, and the buttocks emphasised. These creatures who were so feminine in their physique were nevertheless masculine in their behaviour, and this would have presented a paradox which Greek men would have found stimulating but also instructive. In the literary accounts the Amazons can be seen to represent an inversion of everything which a Greek male (in particular, an Athenian male) would have expected of a woman. They were active in the public arena; they were experts in warfare; they were in political control of the state in which they lived; they refused to marry; they were either asexual or sexually promiscuous; and they valued girl babies more highly than males. In later versions of the story, they also, in cutting off a breast, performed a symbolic denial of the characteristic role of women, motherhood. Athenian men may well have found all this female assertiveness very sexy, but they certainly would not have wanted to recommend it to their own womenfolk.

But recommendation was not, of course, what the Amazon myth was offering. This fantasy of a horde of rampant women could be safely enjoyed because of the cautionary nature of its ending: the Amazons were everything that an Athenian woman ought not to be, and ultimately they failed. There can be little doubt that, in a society like that of Classical Athens, one of the myth’s functions was the provision of a negative role model. When the men in Aristophanes’ comedy *Lysistrata* want to egg each other on to oppose the rebellious women of Athens, they remind each other of a famous painting which shows ‘the Amazons on horseback fighting against men’ (678–9). The message of the myth for both males and females alike was that in a civilised society women are passive, chaste and married. The alternative – behaving like an Amazon – was a mark of barbarism, and its consequences were disastrous both for the women themselves and for the state over which they ruled. In this way the personal and political dominance of men was justified and reinforced.¹²

It would be interesting to know whether the Amazon myth was always ‘correctly’ decoded by the Athenian women who encountered it. It is possible that some of them would have found these assertive females inspiring, in spite of their failure. But of course we have no inkling of women’s reactions. Presumably the role invented for the Amazons – that of vanquished barbarian invader – would have ensured that the majority of women subscribed to the prevailing view and rejected the warrior women’s example.

spring that people would have been reasonably sure that Persephone had returned as corn.

29. For a detailed discussion of the whole question of initiation, see Mylonas (1961), pp. 261–85.

30. Burkert (1983, pp. 60–7) takes this argument further and maintains that the advance of civilisation as a whole was thought of as requiring the confinement of sexual activity to certain well-defined and limited areas.

31. For a much fuller discussion of this aspect of Artemis, see King (1993). As King points out elsewhere (1987, p. 120), women were generally excluded from all culturally significant acts involving bloodshed, including sacrifice. Women were not prohibited from attending sacrifices, but usually they could not perform them.

32. In myth there are a number of daughters who are notable for their loyalty to their fathers: witness, for example, Athena's closeness to Zeus, Antigone's devotion to the blinded Oedipus (Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*), and Electra's passion for vengeance against the murderers of Agamemnon (Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers*, and Sophocles' and Euripides' *Electra*).

33. For much fuller discussions, see Leach (1969) and Warner (1976). According to Leach, this model for bridging the gap between gods and men is most likely to be employed in aristocratic societies, where it is possible for illegitimate sons born to women of the lower classes to be elevated to the ranks of the élite to which their fathers belong.

4 *Women in the poems of Homer*

1. The most common view is that the Trojan War took place in about 1250 BC, and that politically speaking it was a fairly minor event.

2. All translations of the *Iliad* quoted here are from the version by Richmond Lattimore, *The Iliad of Homer*, University of Chicago Press, 1951.

3. See, for example, Kakridis (1971), pp. 68–75.

4. All translations of the *Odyssey* are from the version by Richmond Lattimore, *The Odyssey of Homer*, Harper and Row, 1965.

5. Chronologically, Odysseus visits Circe before he reaches Calypso's island; but in the narrative the Circe episode comes later, since it is recorded in an extended flashback.

6. Penelope's apparent ignorance of her husband's identity has been the subject of much discussion. Some critics believe that in a scene where she interviews the disguised Odysseus (Book 19) the poet wishes to convey the impression that she has in fact recognised her husband. For a recent argument in favour of this view, see 'Penelope's cunning and Homer's', in Winkler (1990), pp. 129–61; and for one against it, see Murnaghan (1987), who believes that Odysseus' willingness to withhold vital knowledge from his wife is indicative of her lack of control over events. What seems certain is that the poet is not prepared to be explicit on the subject. See Katz (1991) for a discussion of 'the disjunction between the two conflicting directions of narrative action' (p. 10); and Felson-Rubin (1994), pp. 4–5.

7. See Foley (1978).

8. See Felson-Rubin (1994), pp. 38–9.

5 *Amazons*

1. Diodorus Siculus 17.77.1; Strabo 11.5.4; Curtius 6.5.24–32; Plutarch, *Life of Alexander* 46.

2. See Strabo 11.5.1, and Diodorus 2.45.3 and 3.53.3.

3. *Airs, waters, places* chap. 17.

4. See Pindar, *Nemean Odes* 3.38, and Euripides, *Heracles* 409.

5. See, for example, Plutarch, *Life of Theseus* 26, Pausanias 1.2.1, Isocrates *Panath.* 193.

6. See Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 685–90, Plutarch, *Life of Theseus* 27, Lysias 2.4–6.

7. See Pausanias 5.11.6 and Quintus Smyrnaeus 1.18–810.

8. See Tyrrell (1984, p. xiii and p. 129, n.1) for a résumé of modern theories about the origins of the Amazons myth.

9. The author of *Airs, waters, places* gives a similar account to Herodotus, and tells us that Sauromatian women in his own day were not allowed to lay aside their virginity until they had killed three men in battle. For Sauromatian female burials see Sulimirski (1970), pp. 34 and 105–6.

10. During the Gulf War of 1991 British newspapers were full of photographs of women soldiers among the US forces. Some future reader might well, in the absence of other information, imagine that women formed the major element in those forces.

11. Boardman (1982) points out that the earliest certain references to the Amazon attack on Athens date from the 460s BC, and speculates that the whole episode may have been invented after the Persian invasion of Greece, in order to provide a mythological precedent. The idea that the Amazons, like the Persians, launched their attack on the Acropolis from the Areopagus hill may have been invented by the tragedian Aeschylus when he wrote the play *The Eumenides* (lines 685–90).

12. For more detailed discussions of the negative implications of the myth, see du Bois (1979), Merck (1978), and Tyrrell (1984).

II THE ARCHAIC AGE 750–500 BC

6 *Women in an age of transition*

1. See, for example, Murray (1980), p. 39, and Morris (1986).

2. See Engels (1980) for a detailed calculation of the effects of regular female infanticide.

3. For further discussion of these developments, see p. 75. Exceptions to the general rule that daughters did not inherit are to be found in Sparta and Gortyn; see p. 155–6, and p. 159.

4. For examples of both endogamy and exogamy among the aristocratic families of later Archaic Greece, see Lacy (1968), pp. 67–8. Tyrants too frequently made alliances through marriage exchanges with rulers of other states.

5. This outline is based on the accounts of the system given by Lacey (1966) and Morris (1986), pp. 105–15. I am in agreement with these two authors when they maintain that there is no good evidence for the existence of the dowry in Homeric Greece. For a summary of opposing arguments in favour of the dowry, see Morris.

6. For a more detailed discussion of the way in which this system operated in Classical Athens, see pp. 115–6.

7. Both exceptions relate to societies which were probably atypical. The law-code of Gortyn, in Crete, prescribed the payment of financial compensation by a wife's seducer to the aggrieved husband, but does not set down

dramatic festivals (see pp. 166, 172). For exclusions in other parts of Greece, see Parker (1983, pp. 83–5).

8. Modern suggestions range from two days to four months – the latter being the period which would have elapsed if the objects had been placed in the ground at the festival of the Scira (see n. 12).

9. The nature of the underground depositories used in Athens is not known, since the exact site for the Thesmophoria has not been located. But evidence from elsewhere suggests that they might consist either of natural clefts in the rocks, or of underground chambers. See Burkert (1985), p. 243. The most detailed source for the rite of the piglets and cakes is the scholiast on Lucian *dial. mer.* 2.1 (Rabe 275.23–276.28).

10. See Henderson (1975, pp. 131–2) and Golden (1988). This *double entendre* becomes the basis of an extended ‘joke’ in a scene from Aristophanes’ *Acharians* (729–835), where a Megarian tries to sell his young daughters in the market disguised as pigs.

11. Winkler (1990, p. 198) notes that the combination of piglets and phallic cakes involves a structured contrast, not just between female and male, but also between raw and cooked, and nature and culture. The mixture is therefore a powerful amalgamation of opposites.

12. Obscenity and chastity were accorded ritual significance in other women-only festivals celebrated in Athens. Women attending the Scira, a festival of Demeter held at harvest-time, were required to remain chaste, and they are said to have eaten garlic in order to discourage the attentions of their husbands. At the Haloo, a secret rite performed by women at Eleusis in honour of Demeter and Dionysus, the women carried models of the male and female sexual organs, drank large quantities of wine and used foul language.

13. See Henrichs (1993) for a summary of recent interpretations of Dionysus.

14. See Kraemer (1979), p. 66, for inscriptional evidence for the cult in Magnesia and Miletus.

15. See Kraemer (1979), pp. 60–5, for a discussion of the evidence relating to Athens.

16. See Henrichs (1978), pp. 124, 130 and 148.

IV IDEAS ABOUT WOMEN IN THE CLASSICAL AGE

15 *Women in drama*

1. Much of the evidence is discussed by Henderson (1991), who believes that women did attend dramatic festivals. For evidence in favour of female attendance, see

Plato, *Gorgias* 502b–d and *Laus* 658a–d; and Aristophanes, *Peace* 962–7. Contrary evidence can perhaps be derived from Aristophanes, *Thesmophoriazusae* 383–97, *Peace* 50–53, and *Birds* 793–6; and from Menander *The Grouch* 965–7.

2. Translations of the *Oresteia* are by Robert Fagles, in Aeschylus, *The Oresteia*, Penguin Books, 1977.

3. Translations of the *Antigone* are by Robert Fagles, in Sophocles, *The Three Theban Plays*, Penguin Books, 1984.

4. Translations of *Medea* are by Philip Vellacott, in Euripides, *Medea and other plays*, Penguin Books, 1963.

5. See pp. 153 and 207, Sparta and Gortyn, n. 9. For religious festivals, see Zeitlin (1990), p. 66, n. 8.

16 *Women and the philosophers*

1. Since many of the issues raised by Plato are still of considerable relevance, it seems valid to discuss his ideas in the context of a question which would have been meaningless to Greeks in the fourth century BC, but which has been much debated in recent years – can Plato be regarded as a feminist? For discussions which focus on this question, see in particular Wender (1973), Annas (1981, pp. 181–5), Vlastos (1989), and Lefkowitz (1989).

2. P. Bunkle, ‘A history of the women’s movement’, *Broadsheet*, part 1, Sept. 1979, p. 27.

3. Translation by J.A.K. Thomson, in *The ethics of Aristotle*, Penguin, 1976.

4. Translation by Thompson: see note 3.

17 *Women in Classical Sculpture*

1. For the *kore* figures on the Acropolis, see p. 92. For the statues which were there in the Classical Age, see the account by Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 1.22.4–28.3. See p. 191 for the stress on Athena’s masculine qualities.

2. See, for example, Pollitt (1972), pp. 33–5.

3. These paintings do not survive, but they are referred to by Pausanias, 1.17.

4. See Castriota (1992), pp. 134–74.

5. See B. Cohen (1983).

6. See, for example, Osborne (1987).

7. The ‘Venus Genetrix’ is a Roman copy of a Greek work, and the date of the original is not certain; but many of the stylistic traits belong to the fifth century. See Ridgway (1981), pp. 198–201.

POSTSCRIPT

18 *The Hellenistic Age*

1. See Goldhill (1986), pp. 109–11.

2. See Pomeroy (1984), pp. 115–21, 156–60 and 172.

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