

Amazons: Comparative study of Amazon mythology in ancient literature and art

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Abstract

"I myself, a helper in war, was marshalled among them on that day when the Amazon women came, men's equals" - Priam in Homer's *Iliad* iii.182-189

Throughout the course of history the Amazons have continued to capture the fascination and imagination of scholars, historians and archaeologists alike. Accounts of these mysterious female warriors can be found scattered amongst ancient Greek and Roman literature. They also featured prominently in the artwork, both public and private, that emerged from these cultures. It is the aim of this paper to explore these representations and develop a clear understanding of the ways in which the Amazon myths were used to shape and manipulate the views of their audiences. As such this paper will begin by considering the extant ancient Greek literature which offers recounts of these women. It will then consider the ancient Greek iconography available which portrays these women. This will be followed by a reflection of the extant ancient Roman literature, before an overview of Roman iconography and how the Amazons featured in this is provided. Final remarks and conclusions will then be presented.

Keywords: Amazons, mythology, representation, manipulation, art, literature

Amazon Mythology

Many attempts have been made over history to understand the use of Amazon mythology by the Ancient Greeks and Romans. Whilst modern historians and classicists have studied these uses extensively and somewhat exhaustively, no apparent efforts have been made to complete a comparative study of these uses. As such this paper will explore how these myths were employed by both the Ancient Greek and Roman culture in order to shape and manipulate the views of their societies. It will attempt to highlight obvious similarities and differences that emerge from this study. To achieve this it will focus on the extant literature and artworks, both public and private, as well as a number of modern interpretations that are available.

Greek literature

During the Classical and Hellenistic Ages the Amazons maintained a prominent position in both the ancient Greek world and imagination. This becomes apparent through the discovery of a substantial amount of literature and iconographical evidence depicting the Amazons. Our earliest known account of the Amazons comes from Homer, a Greek poet composing in the eighth century B.C.E. ([West, 2010](#)). In his account Homer refers to the Amazons as the 'peers of men' ([Hom. Il.3.181-191 & 6:178-190](#)). This idea is similarly conveyed in the now lost *Aethiopis*, a Greek epic from the eighth century B.C.E. (AETH 1). Here the Amazon Queen, Penthesileia, the daughter of Ares, comes to the aid the Trojans. The association of the Amazons with the Greek God of war, Ares, as well as the development of a battle ready, warrior identity is further developed by ancient Greek

authors Apollodorus, Aeschylus, Quintus Smyrnaeus and Herodotus.¹ In these accounts, epithets such as 'warrior-like' and 'killers or men' are used frequently (Apd. II.5.9; [Plu. The.XXVII.1-2](#)). Such epithets become so popular that fourth century writer Palaephatus conceives the idea that the Amazons were not women but barbarian men (Pal. Per Apistōn.XXXIII). Even at such an early stage of Greek literature it quickly becomes clear that the Amazon imagery was used to express the Greek concept of 'the other' ([Stewart, 1995](#)).

In addition to their portrayal as persons who engaged in the practise of war and war-like activities, the Amazons were presented as bold, licentious women who operated outside the patronage and control of the Greek patriarchal society. In his *Geography* Strabo recounts that the Amazons spent most of their time by themselves occupied with the duties normally completed by men ([Strab. XI.5.1](#)). These duties included ploughing, training horses and hunting. Herodotus and Aeschylus are similar to place the Amazons beyond the borders of the Greece, identifying them in the district of Themiscyra ([Hdt. IV:110](#); [Aes. Pro.707](#)). The placement of the Amazons outside the boundaries of the Greek World ensures that the Amazons were perceived as 'barbarians' in the pejorative sense ([Marincola, 2011](#)). Ancient writers add to this image by recounting that it is here that the Amazons ruled amongst themselves through an elected Queen. In *The Fall of Troy*, the Amazon Queen Penthesileia leads the Amazons into battle ([QS. 1](#)). In Apollodorus' *Bibliotheca* we learn of the Amazon Queen Hippolyte who contended Hercules in his labours ([Apd. II.5.9](#)). These accounts clearly illustrate a matriarchal society; the opposite of a Greek 'civilised' society.

From the Greek perspective, women during the eighth century B.C.E. were expected to be submissive, sexually chaste and ardent wives who kept home and family ([Powell, 2010](#)). This was the practised norm of society and anything that differed from this image

¹ It should be noted that this list is by no means exhaustive of the epithets attributed to the Amazons.

was considered other, barbaric and even monstrous (Stewart, 1995). Such ideals are affirmed in the writings by Greek authors Homer and Aristotle. In the *Iliad* Homer's view becomes clear: women should not concern themselves with tasks such as war; instead they should apply themselves to completing the role(s) society has assigned them like keeping house (Hom. *Il.* VI. 490-493). Aristotle further develops this idea through the statement 'the male is, by nature, more suited to rule than the female' (Aris. *Pol* 1259 b 2-4). The survival of Greek society is dependent on its male figures; women serve the sole purpose of producing children, in particular male children ([Tyrell, 1984](#)).

As established in the earlier paragraphs, the Amazons were not submissive or ardent wives that kept house. They engaged in the practises of men, operated outside the Greek borders, and were guided by a matriarchal system of governance. The Amazons, by this standard, embodied every feature that was deemed a direct antithesis to ordinary Greek practise. Herodotus records, that the Amazons recognised this: 'we shoot the bow and throw the javelin and ride, but have never learned women's work' (Hdt. IV.114). As such, it is of great importance to note that almost every ancient Greek account of the Amazons seeks to highlight these existing differences. By elucidating the differences and identifying those as 'barbaric' or 'the other' the ancient Greek writers sought to manipulate their audiences, reinforcing the correct conduct, behaviour and identity expected by these ancient cultures.

Whilst at first it appears that Greek literature was determined to see the Amazons perceived as barbaric, divergent and other; a closer analysis suggests that the Amazons may also have been recognised as heroic or heroines. Heroes, in the Greek sense, were beings that exhibited supernatural elements or traits, went on quests or journeys, faced a variety

of challenges or obstacles before returning as enlightened beings (Powell, 2010). As the daughters of Ares, skilled in the arts of combat and horse training with bodies that were ‘stronger and larger than male ones’, the Amazons may have been seen, and deliberately depicted, as heroines in the Greek culture (Ephorus. 70). This theory is supported by modern scholars [Blok \(1995\)](#), Hardwick (1998) and [Lefkowitz \(1984\)](#). By depicting the Amazons as heroines, the ancient Greeks were able to glorify their victories against the Amazons; against beings that were considered strong and heroic.

Greek art

Our earliest depiction of the Amazons occurs on a fragmentary terracotta votive shield ([Appendix Figure 1](#)). On this fragment two chief figures can be identified. The first figure, located on the left, wears a short tunic and high crest helmet, and holds a sword similar to those found on early proto-attic fragments. This figure is thought to be Achilles. Achilles holds the helmet of the other key figure, identified by Bothmer (1957) as an Amazon. The Amazon wears a kind of peplos² and features crude indications of feminine breasts. They also hold a spear. It has been suggested that the Amazon illustrated is Penthesileia. Whilst the exact interpretation of the shield remains uncertain, it has been proposed that the illustration depicts an Amazon at the mercy of a victorious Greek. This suggestion appears to conform to an emerging and reoccurring motif in which the Amazons, the worthy but uncultured opponents, are conquered by the Greek or other worthy heroes.

The development of this motif can be seen in an increasing number of depictions of Ἀμαζονομαχία³ during the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E. On a black figure amphora attributed to the painter Timiades, the Amazonomachy of Herakles and Andromache is

² A type of skirt common for this period and location.

³ Amazonomachy; the Greek world for “Battles of the Amazons”.

illustrated ([Appendix Figure 2](#)). In this depiction Andromache, is forced into a kneeling stance by the dominating Herakles who wears the skin of the Nemean lion. Two other Amazons, equipped with round shields and spears, are featured engaging in battles of their own. Illustrations like this are increasingly popular during this period and feature on a number of household items. Whilst these depictions highlight the Amazons' strength and worthiness as opponents, the motive of these illustrations is clearly to reinforce the Greeks' successes over the 'other'. Another example of this motif can be seen in the Amazonomachy of Theseus and the Amazons ([Appendix Figure 3](#)). Constructed in the Classical Period, the Amazons in this example grasp hoplite spears and ride horses. They wear panther skins which are thought to have emphasised their wildness of character and exoticism ([Osborne, 1998](#)). Their Greek opponents in contrast are armed with round shields and swords typical of this period. They do not feature clothing. In this example it appears that the Amazons are about to be overwhelmed by the Greeks who outnumber them, three to two.

In addition to Greek paintings, Amazons also feature in Greek sculpture from the Classical period onwards. On the western walls of the Parthenon, marble metopes capture the various conquests of the Greeks against the Amazons ([Ebersole, 1899](#)). In almost all of these scenes the Amazons are shown being overcome by the Greek forces. In addition to metopes, stand-alone sculptures of the Amazons have also been uncovered. In these the Amazons are often portrayed as wounded or suffering greatly ([Appendix Figure 4](#)). With supple, yet muscular, bodies the Amazons are often shown leaning on their weapons or supporting posts ([Appendix Figure 5](#)). In some instances the Amazons carry no arms or equipment ([Appendix Figure 6](#)). This depiction of the Amazons, as injured and defenceless,

strongly indicates the view held by Greek society towards persons classified as the other or 'divergent'.

Greek women, in contrast, did not feature largely in art until the end of the fifth century B.C.E. When they did come to feature they were depicted fully clothed and performing duties deemed 'feminine'. Examples of these duties included performing rituals, nurturing children and performing household tasks. The diverse nature of these images, when compared, compels the observer to consider the idea that these illustrations were created in order to manipulate and shape the views of their relevant audiences. By portraying the Amazons in a particular way, the Greek artists sought to reinforce what were, and what were not, acceptable practises and behaviours as defined by ancient Greek society.

Roman literature

Amazon mythology continued to experience great popularity under the Roman Empire. Following the defeat of Marc Antony at Actium in 31B.C.E. and the subsequent establishment of the Roman Empire by Octavian, a number of literary and iconographical works emerged featuring Amazon(s). These works aimed at redefining the ambiguous Roman identity as well as promoting the Roman eminence; its culture and its people. An excellent example of such a work produced during this period is Virgil's *Aeneid*.

Publius Virgilius Maro, was a Roman who lived from 70B.C.E. to C.E.19 during the transition of the Roman state from Republic to Empire (West, 2010). He is particularly well known for his contribution of the *Aeneid*, an epic poem which tells the story of Aeneas and his battles against barbarian people of Italy in his quest to found a new home. It is in this

poem that Virgil introduces the Volscian Queen Camilla who, with her troops, assists Turnus in his battle against Aeneas ([Vir. Aen.VII.803](#)). Camilla, as Virgil first describes her, is a mixture of warrior and pastoralist who is similar to the Amazons of Thrace (Vir. *Aen.*XI.648). Bearing a quiver and pastoral myrtle 'tipped with steel', Camilla is the 'warrior-maid' who leads 'her troop of horse and squadrons gay with brass' (Vir. *Aen.*XI.376-444). Having been raised amongst the shepherds in the lonely mountains to bare a weapon, she has never 'trained her woman's hand to Minerva's distaff or basket of wool' (Vir. *Aen.*XI.550-580). Camilla, it would appear, represents a Roman adaptation of the Amazon. Like the Greek Amazons, Camilla embodies the warrior spirit, choosing to immerse herself in the art of war and weaponry. She has also not received training in the art(s) of weaving, a skill highly prized amongst the cultured Greek and Roman women. In addition she is said to have worn the skin of a tiger (Vir. *Aen.*XI.550-580). The only difference that separates Camilla from the Greek Amazons relates to the sexual adventures and morals of these women. The Amazons, according to the Greeks, were licentious women whose sexual encounters were driven by passion and the desire to procreate. Camilla, by contrast, cherished her 'maidenhood', and was content serving Diana, the Roman virgin goddess of childbirth and women (Vir. *Aen.*XI.580-590).

By including a character like Camilla, who exhibited characteristics strikingly similar to those found amongst the Amazons of Greek literature, Virgil was able to reconstruct the Roman identity as well as reinforce the idea of a predetermined fate that awaited those who opposed the expanding Roman supremacy. As highlighted above, following the tumult of civil wars in 30B.C.E. the Roman identity was left very much in question. This was mainly due to the diverse group of people that the Empire now encompassed (Vel. *Rom.* 2.15). It

was therefore essential that the Roman identity was both restored and refashioned in order to minimise the chances of further civil wars ([Toll, 1997](#)). One way that the Roman identity could be restored was by reminding the Roman people of the foundation of the Roman city and the historicity of their past. In his quest to subdue the Italians and surrounding barbaric groups, Aeneas showed great courage, piety and virtue; characteristics that were regarded highly by the Romans throughout their history (Vir. *Aen.*VI.845-840). By detailing Aeneas' defeat of the Italians and importantly Camilla, Virgil clearly demonstrated an example in which the Roman identity was expressed and Rome's eminence highlighted.

Another example of Roman literature which featured the Amazon figure is Plutarch's *Life of Theseus*. A philosopher and prolific writer, Plutarch held strong beliefs and theories concerning a symbiotic partnership between Greece as educator and Rome as a hegemonic power (West, 2010). These beliefs and theories become evident in his works. A specific example can be seen in his recount of the actions of Theseus in battle against the Amazons. In this Plutarch concentrates on how Greek hegemony, as a result of the battle, had a civilising influence on barbarian traits ([Duff, 1999](#)). According to Plutarch the battle between the Amazons and the Athenians was sparked by Theseus' abduction of the Amazon Queen Antiope ([Plu. *The Rise and Fall*.13.](#)). The Amazons, outraged at this abduction of their Queen, raise arms and challenge the Athenians for their Queen. Interestingly, before Plutarch describes the battle, he cites the historian Menecrates who comments on the effect Greek hegemony has on the Amazon Antiope. Menecrates reflects that Antiope whilst captive on Theseus' ship quickly develops the proper womanly attributes and rejected the advances of all men other than Theseus ([Plu. *The Rise and Fall*.32.](#)). This anecdote in many ways implies the potential transition of the Amazons from uncultured barbarians to women of the Greek society. Plutarch follows this with a refocus on the battle between the

Athenians and the Amazons. Plutarch carefully details that the Amazons, at one stage during the battle, gain the upper hand on the left wing and force the Athenians to retreat (Plu. *The Rise and Fall*.33.). This illustration of strength is deliberate, and allows the Amazons to be viewed as worthy adversaries for the heroic Greeks. This strength is short lived and the Amazons are eventually routed back to their homeland. Plutarch's use of the Amazon mythology in his account is often seen as an attempt to highlight Rome's identity as the new educators of the world. It is also seen to send a clear message to groups that dare challenge Rome's supremacy during the early C.E. second century; become an allied province of Rome, or become Rome's slave(s) ([Erin, 2010](#)).

Roman art

As mentioned above, following the establishment of the Roman Empire by Octavian after his victory at Actium, a number of iconographical works emerged featuring the Amazons. These works aimed to reinforce the Roman identity and dominance of the Empire by drawing on the differences between the Roman people and those classed as the other such as the Amazons. An excellent example of this can be seen in the murals uncovered in Pompeii (Appendix Figures [7](#) and [8](#)). In these murals the men, who are not identified, are illustrated grabbing the Amazons by the hair in an attempt to pull them to the ground. The Amazons, who wear short chitons⁴, are depicted on horseback and wielding axes. By pulling the Amazons by their hair to the ground and into submission, the men are clearly illustrating their strength and dominance over the barbaric warrior women and, by extension, any

⁴ A type of skirt common in this period.

person or group that opposed Roman rule. Such illustrations send clear and concise messages to their Roman viewers regarding the Roman identity and eminence.

Another example in which the Amazon imagery has been used to promote Rome's eminence can be seen on the Temple of Apollo in Circo in Rome. Built by C. Sosius the temple features an encounter between the Greeks and the Amazons. Roman art expert Zanker proposes that this artwork may have been compared favourably by Roman viewers with Augustus' defeat of the eastern female barbarian threat of Cleopatra ([Zanker, 1988](#)). Like the Amazons, Cleopatra is often regarded as a female warrior who wielded enormous power and influence during her time ([Smith, 2008](#)). Having managed to captivate two elite Roman men, Julius Caesar and Marcus Antonius, Cleopatra presented a real threat to the Roman forces. It was only after her defeat at the battle of Actium by Octavian and subsequent suicide that the Roman forces could proclaim complete dominance and power. This representation is important as it acts as a warning to barbaric nations of Rome's position of power and control.

Before the Later Roman Empire, Amazons were rarely depicted as positive characters or protagonists in Roman art or literature (Erin, 2010). At the end of the Julio-Claudian dynasty however we see the transformation of the Amazons in Roman art from the barbaric female warriors to the founders and goddesses of Roman provinces. In Asia Minor a statute of Tiberius is decorated on all four sides by a relief of partially nude Amazons who represent six cities in the area ([Appendix Figure 9](#)). In addition to the statute, the Amazons also make an appearance on a number of important coins. On a coin minted under Domitian two Amazons can be seen facing and offering their hands to each other ([Appendix Figure 10](#)). The Amazons personify a treaty between the cities of Ephesus and Smyrna. A similar example depicts the treaty between eponymous heroines Myrina and Cyme ([Appendix](#)

[Figure 11](#)). It is thought that these coins illustrate the blending of Romans and Non-Romans that followed the conquering of new territory and areas ([Aldhouse-Green, 2006](#)).

Conclusion

As stated earlier, the aim of this paper was to explore the various representations of the Amazons and develop a clear understanding of the ways in which Amazon myths were used to shape and manipulate the views of the audiences reviewing them. To achieve this, it considered a range of sources produced by both the Ancient Greeks and Ancient Romans. After a detailed analysis and comparison of the Ancient Greek Literature and Art, with the Ancient Roman Literature and Art, it has become clear that both cultures used the Amazon mythology greatly to shape, manipulate and influence the views of their audiences, and bring them into alignment with the views of those deemed important or influential by society.

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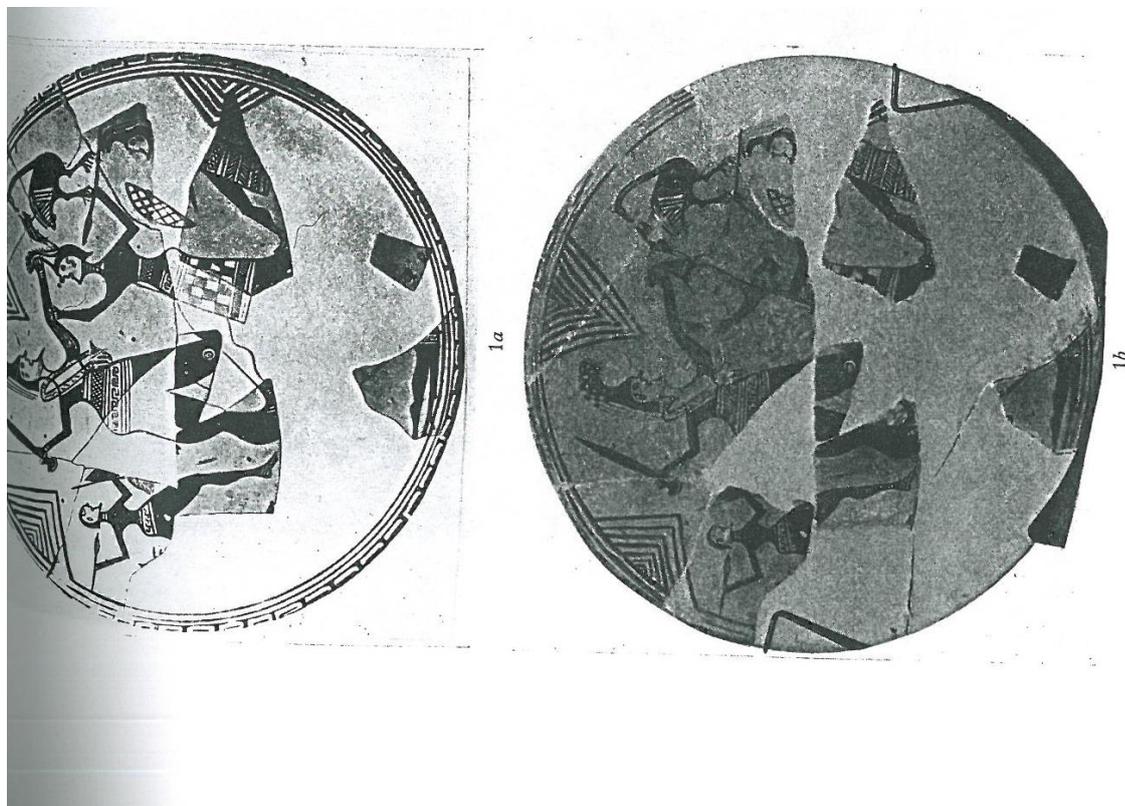
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Appendix

[Figure 1. Von Bothmer, D. \(1957\). *Amazons in Greek Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.](#)
Plate. I, 1a-b.



[Figure 2. Carpenter, T.H. \(1991\). *Art and Myth in Ancient Greece*. London: Routledge.](#)
Image no. 195.



Figure 3. [Boardman, J. \(1989\)](#). *Athenian Red Figure Vases: The Classical Period*. London: Routledge. Image no. 230.



Figure 4. Von Bothmer, D. (1957). *Amazons in Greek Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Plate. LXXXIX no. 1.



Figure 5. Von Bothmer, D. (1957). *Amazons in Greek Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Plate. LXXXIX no. 2.



Figure 6. Von Bothmer, D. (1957). *Amazons in Greek Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. . Plate. LXXXIX no. 3.



[Figure 7](#). [LIMC, Vol. 1. \(1981\)](#), Image no. 485



[Figure 8](#). LIMC, Vol. 1. (1981), Image no. 488.



[Figure 9](#). LIMC, Vol. 1. (1981), Image no. 798.



[Figure 10](#). LIMC, Vol. 1. (1981), Image no. 800.



[Figure 11](#). LIMC, Vol. 1. (1981), Image no. 799.

