

I

ANCIENT PUZZLES AND MODERN MYTHS

In olden times, the earth thundered with the pounding of horses' hooves. In that long ago age, women would saddle their horses, grab their lances, and ride forth with their men folk to meet the enemy in battle on the steppes. The women of that time could cut out an enemy's heart with their swift, sharp swords. Yet they also comforted their men and harbored great love in their hearts. . . . After the frenzied battle, Queen Amezan leaned down from her saddle and realized in despair that the warrior she had killed was her beloved.

A choking cry filled her throat: My sun has set forever!

—*Caucasus tradition, Nart Saga 26*

Achilles removed the brilliant helmet from the lifeless Amazon queen. Penthesilea had fought like a raging leopard in their duel at Troy. Her valor and beauty were undimmed by dust and blood. Achilles' heart lurched with remorse and desire. . . . All the Greeks on the battlefield crowded around and marveled, wishing with all their hearts that their wives at home could be just like her.

—*Quintus of Smyrna, The Fall of Troy*

IF QUEEN AMEZAN AND QUEEN PENTHESILEA could somehow meet in real life, they would recognize each other as sister Amazons. Two tales, two storytellers, two sites far apart in time and place, and yet one common tradition of women who made love and war. The first tale arose *outside* the classical Greek world, in the northern Black Sea–Caucasus region among the descendants of the steppe nomads of Scythia. The other tale originated *within* the ancient Greek world, in epic poems about the legendary Trojan War. In the two traditions the male and female roles

are reversed, yet the stories resonate in striking ways—sharing similar characters, dramatic battle situations, emotions, tragic themes—and even the word “Amazon.”

Recently translated from the Circassian language, the first story tells of the mythic leader of a band of women warriors, Amezan. It is one of many “Nart” sagas, oral traditions about heroes and heroines of the heart of ancient Scythian—and Amazon—territory (now southern Russia). The Caucasus tales preserve ancient Indo-European myths combined with the folk legends of Eurasian nomads, first encountered by Greeks who sailed the Black Sea in the seventh century BC. The sagas not only describe strong horsewomen who match the descriptions of Amazons in Greek myth, but they also suggest a possible Caucasian etymology for the ancient Greek loanword “amazon.”¹

The second vignette, about Achilles and Penthesilea, is an episode from the archaic Trojan War epic cycles, one of which was the *Iliad*. Many oral traditions about Amazons were already circulating before Homer’s day, the eighth/seventh century BC, around the time when the first recognizable images of Amazons appeared in Greek art. The *Iliad* covered only two months of the great ten-year war with Troy. At least six other epic poems preceded or continued the events in the *Iliad*, but they survive only as fragments. Many other lost oral traditions about the Trojan War are alluded to the *Iliad* and other works, and they are illustrated in ancient art depicting Greeks fighting Amazons. The lost poem *Arimaspea* by the Greek traveler Aristeas (ca. 670 BC) contained Amazon stories. Another wandering poet, Magnes from Smyrna (said to be Homer’s birthplace), recited tales in Lydian about an Amazon invasion of Lydia in western Anatolia in the early seventh century BC. Some scholars suggest that there was once a freestanding epic poem about Amazons, along the lines of the *Iliad*, a tantalizing possibility.²

One of the lost Trojan War epics, the *Aethiopsis* (attributed to Arctinos of Miletos, eighth/seventh century BC), was a sequel to the *Iliad*, taking up the action where Homer left off. The *Aethiopsis* described the arrival of Queen Penthesilea and her band of Amazon mercenaries who came to help the Trojans fight the Greeks. Scenes from this poem were very popular in Greek vase paintings. In the third century AD, the Greek poet Quintus of Smyrna drew on the *Aethiopsis* to retell the story

of Penthesilea's duel with the Greek champion Achilles, in his *Fall of Troy*, quoted in this chapter's second epigraph.

Both of the tales quoted above—one from Scythia and the other from the Greek homeland—feature women whose fighting skills matched those of men. Their heroic exploits were imaginary, but their characters and actions arose from a common historical source: warrior cultures of the steppes where nomad horsemen and -women could experience parity at a level almost unimaginable for ancient Hellenes.

Myth and reality commingled in the Greek imagination, and as more and more details came to light about Scythian culture, the women of Scythia were explicitly identified as “Amazons.” Today's archaeological and linguistic discoveries point to the core of reality that lay behind Greek Amazon myths. But in fact, the newfound archaeological evidence allows us to finally catch up with the ancient Greeks themselves. The Amazons of myth and the independent women of Scythia were *already* deeply intertwined in Greek thinking more than twenty-five hundred years *before* modern archaeologists and classicists began to realize that women warriors really did exist and influenced Greek traditions.

Amazons of classical literature and art arose from hazy facts elaborated by Greek mythographers and then came into sharper focus as knowledge increased. Rumors of warlike nomad societies—where a *woman* might win fame and glory through “manly” prowess with weapons—fascinated the Greeks. The idea of bold, resourceful women warriors, the equals of men, dwelling at the edges of the known world, inspired an outpouring of mythic stories, pitting the greatest Greek heroes against Amazon heroines from the East. Every Greek man, woman, boy, and girl knew these adventure stories by heart, stories illustrated in public and private artworks. The details of the “Amazon” lifestyle aroused speculation and debate. Many classical Greco-Roman historians, philosophers, geographers, and other writers described Amazonian-Scythian history and customs.

The early Greeks received their information about northeastern peoples from many different sources, including travelers, traders, and explorers, and from the indigenous, migrating tribes around the Black Sea, Caucasus Mountains, Caspian Sea, and Central Asia. The tribes' accounts of themselves and culturally similar groups were transmitted

(and garbled) by layers of translations over thousands of miles. Another probable source was the high population of household slaves in Greece who hailed from Thrace and the Black Sea region.³ Selection bias was a factor. Accounts of “barbarian” customs that piqued Greek curiosity or matched Greek expectations might have been chosen over others. Yet a surprising number of accurate details, confirmed by archaeology, managed to sneak through all these obstacles.

The Scythians themselves left no written records. Much of our knowledge about them comes from the art and literature of Greece and Rome. But the Scythians did leave spectacular physical evidence of their way of life for archaeologists to uncover. Dramatic excavations of tombs, bodies, and artifacts illuminate the links between the women called Amazons and the warlike horsewomen archers of the Scythian steppes. According to one leading archaeologist, “All of the legends about Amazons find their visible archaeological reflection within the grave goods” of the ancient Scythians.⁴ That is an overstatement, yet recent and ongoing discoveries do offer astonishing evidence of the existence of authentic women warriors whose lives matched the descriptions of Amazons in Greek myths, art, and classical histories, geographies, ethnographies, and other writings. Scythian graves do contain battle-scarred skeletons of women buried with their weapons, horses, and other possessions. Scientific bone analysis proves that women rode, hunted, and engaged in combat in the very regions where Greco-Roman mythographers and historians once located “Amazons.”

Archaeology shows that Amazons were not simply symbolic figments of the Greek imagination, as many scholars claim. Nor are Amazons unique to Greek culture, another common claim. In fact, Greeks were not the only people to spin tales about Amazon-like figures and warrior women ranging over the vast regions east of the Mediterranean. Other literate cultures, such as Persia, Egypt, India, and China, encountered warlike nomads in antiquity, and their narratives drew on their own knowledge of steppe nomads through alliances, exploration, trade, and warfare. Their heroes also fought and fell in love with Amazon-like heroines. Moreover, vestiges of the tales told in antiquity by Scythian peoples about themselves are preserved in traditional oral legends, epic poems, and stories of Central Asia, some only recently committed to writing.

Who were the Amazons? Their complex identity is enmeshed in history and imagination. To see them clearly, we first need to cast away murky symbolic interpretations and spurious popular beliefs.

POPULAR MISCONCEPTIONS

The single most notorious “fact” often used to describe Amazons is wrong. The idea that each Amazon removed one breast so that she could shoot arrows with ease is based on zero evidence. It was refuted in antiquity. Yet this bizarre belief, unique to the ancient Greeks, has persisted for more than twenty-five hundred years since it was first proposed in the fifth century BC by a Greek historian dabbling in etymology. The origins of the “single-breasted” Amazon and the controversies that still surround this false notion are so complex and fascinating that Amazon bosoms have their own chapter.

Some fallacies about Amazons can be traced to inconsistencies, gaps—and wild speculations—in the ancient Greek and Latin sources. Other modern misconceptions originate in attempts to explain Amazons solely in terms of their symbolic meaning for the Greeks, especially male Athenians.⁵ Conflicting claims in antiquity are still debated today, like the single-breast story. Were the Amazons a true gynocracy, a society of self-governing women living apart from men? Some pictured a tribe of man-hating virgins or domineering women who enslaved weak men and mutilated baby boys, a vision that led to speculations on how Amazon society reproduced.

AMAZONS, A TRIBE KNOWN FOR STRONG WOMEN

The notion that Amazons were hostile toward men was controversial even in antiquity. The confusion begins with their name. Linguistic evidence suggests that the earliest Greek form of the non-Greek name *Amazon* designated an ethnic group distinguished by a high level of equality between men and women. Rumors of such parity would have startled the Greeks, who lived according to strictly divided male and female roles. Long before the word “Scythian” or specific tribal names

appeared in Greek literature, “Amazons” may have been a name for a people notorious for strong, free women.⁶

The earliest reference to the Amazons in Greek literature appears in Homer’s *Iliad* in the formulaic phrase *Amazones antianeirai*. Modern scholars are unanimous that the plural noun *Amazones* was not originally a Greek word. But it is unclear which language it was borrowed from and what its original meaning was. What is known for certain is that *Amazon* does not have anything to do with breasts (chapter 5 for probable origins of the name).

There is something remarkable about Homer’s earliest use of *Amazones* in the *Iliad*. The form of the name falls into the linguistic category of ethnic designations in epic poetry (another Homeric example is *Myrmidones*, the warriors led by Achilles at Troy). This important clue tells us that *Amazones* was originally a Hellenized name for “a plurality, a people,” as in *Hellenes* for Greeks and *Trooes* for the Trojans. The Greeks used distinctive feminine endings (typically *-ai*) for associations made up exclusively of women, such as *Nymphai* (Nymphs) or *Trooiai* for Trojan women. But *Amazones* does not have the feminine ending that one would expect if the group consisted only of women. Therefore, the name *Amazones* would originally have been “understood as . . . a people consisting of men and women.” As classicist Josine Blok points out in her discussion of this puzzle, without the addition of the feminine epithet *antianeirai* “there is no way of telling that this was a people of female warriors.”⁷ The inescapable conclusion is that *Amazones* was not a name for a women-only entity, as many have assumed. Instead *Amazones* once indicated an entire ethnic group.

So the earliest literary references to Amazons identified them as a nation or people, followed by *antianeirai*, a descriptive tag along the lines of “the Saka, Pointed Hat Wearers,” or “the Budini, Eaters of Lice.” Indeed, many ancient Greek writers do treat Amazons as a tribe of men and women. They credit the tribe with innovations such as ironworking and domestication of horses. Some early vase paintings show men fighting alongside Amazons.⁸

But what about the meaning of the epithet attached to *Amazones*? That word is slippery and complex. *Antianeirai* is often translated in modern times as “opposites of men,” “against men,” “opposing men,”

“antagonistic to men,” or “man-hating.” In fact, however, in ancient Greek epic diction the prefix *anti-* did not ordinarily suggest opposition or antagonism as the English prefix “anti-” does today. Instead *anti-* meant “equivalent” or “matching.” Accordingly, *antianeirai* is best translated as “equals of men.”

Such ethnonyms, names of tribes, are typically masculine, with the understanding that the female members are included in the collective name (as in “man” for all humans or “les Indiens d’Amérique” for an entire ethnic group). But the curious formation *aneirai* is a unique feminine plural compound that included the Greek masculine noun “man,” *aner*. A parallel formation occurs in the Amazon name Deianeira, “Man-Destroyer,” in which *aner* is the object of the verb stem *dei* (destroy) with the suffix *-ia*. If there had been a group of women named thus, the plural would be the *Deianeirai*.⁹

Amazones antianeirai is “unmistakably an ethnic designation,” yet the epithet is feminine, a reversal of expectations that puzzles scholars.¹⁰ The odd semantic effect of “men,” in the sense of a whole people or nation, combined with a feminine description brings to mind the popular tendency among English speakers to refer to cats as “she” and dogs as “he,” even though it is understood that tomcats and bitches are also members of the respective species.

The adaptation of the original, unknown barbarian name to the Greek epic formula for a whole people produced “a proper noun riddled with ambiguity.” Some scholars interpret this peculiarity as evidence that Homer’s *Amazones antianeirai* must have been a purely mythic construction created by the Greeks for a fictional “race” of women warriors. The assumption is that the idea of women behaving like men was so difficult to grasp, so “confusing and menacing” and disruptive for Greeks, that the name was “only conceivable in the imaginary world of myth.” But should we underestimate the ancient Greeks’ ability to conceive of and name a real people whose gender relations were different from their own? In fact, it was common for the Greeks to describe and *name foreigners by reference to their exotic, disturbing customs*, such as lice eating, head-hunting, polyandry (multiple husbands), and cannibalism.¹¹

The linguistic evidence points to a reasonable explanation for the unusual semantics of the name “Amazons, equals of men.” The fact that

the earliest nomenclature for Amazons took the form of a name for an ethnic group is highly significant. Real ethnic groups, of course, are made up of men, women, and children, and in early antiquity the word *Amazones* would have been “understood as a group of people consisting of men and women,” as Blok points out. Homer and other archaic writers could have used the phrase *Amazones andres*, “the Amazon people,” but their choice of *Amazones antianeirai* clearly highlighted this group’s most outstanding quality. Because *aner/andres* could also mean “man/men” in the sense of a whole people, a tribe, or a nation, the phrase also carries the connotation of “equal humans.” The Greeks first identified the Amazons ethnographically, as a nation of men and women distinguished by something outstanding in their gender relations. Later, any ambivalence or anxiety that knowledge of this alternative gender-neutral culture evoked among Greeks was played out in their mythic narratives about martial women.

Here is a plausible sequence: Archaic Greeks had heard about peoples ranging over the Black Sea–steppes region, a warrior society that exhibited a remarkable degree of sexual equality. Their non-Greek name, sounding something like “amazon,” was adapted to the epic form of ethnonyms, thus *Amazones*. The descriptive epithet *antianeirai* was added to call out the most notable feature of this group: gender equality. The epithet was feminine to emphasize the extraordinary status of women among this particular people, relative to the status of women in Greek culture. Unlike most other ethnic groups familiar to the Greeks, in which the men were the most significant members, among *Amazones* it was the women who stood out. *Amazones antianeirai* could originally have meant something like “Amazons, the tribe whose women are equals,” or simply “Amazons, the equals.” A race of warlike men *and women* piqued the curiosity of the Greeks and led to stories about heroic women of faraway lands who were worthy opponents of male warriors.

Gradually, as more travel and information allowed the Greeks to differentiate among the numerous individual ethnolinguistic tribes of Scythia, the old concept of “Amazons” as a collective name to designate an exotic “race” of equal sexes evolved to refer to a related but novel idea: a long-ago tribe of warlike women who fought men, dominated men, or lived entirely without men. The meaning of *anti-* in the epithet

began to shift from “equals of” to “opponents of” to suggest hostility to males, and the atypical feminine form of what was once a proper name for an entire people now encouraged visions of a mythic gynocracy.¹²

The earliest name for Amazons preserved in literature is strong evidence that it first entered Greek culture as a term for hazily understood “Scythian” peoples; then over time Amazons became a mythic construct, while still retaining and accumulating kernels of truth. The linguistic evidence gives us a practical approach to understanding Amazons as members of real nomad tribes. This perspective, in turn, helps us make sense of many other striking and ambiguous features of the mythic and later historical accounts of Amazons.

MAN-HATING VIRGINS?

The Greek playwright Aeschylus (fifth century BC) called Amazons “maidens fearless in battle.” *Maiden*, often conflated with *virgin*, meant “unmarried.” The notion that Amazons were lifelong virgins who resisted sex with men might have arisen from comparisons with the virginal Greek goddesses of war and hunting, Athena and Artemis. “Man-killers” (*androktones*) was another ancient label for Amazons too. Herodotus (ca. 450 BC) remarked that some Amazons of Scythia did not marry unless they had slain (or fought) a man in battle, and he commented that a few never married. Pomponius Mela (ca. AD 43) wrote that “to kill the enemy is a woman’s military duty [and] virginity was the punishment for those who fail.” But that did not mean that the women remained technical virgins, since Herodotus and other ancient authors describe plenty of Amazon sex with men outside of traditional marriage as understood by the Greeks. Some, like Diodorus and Hippocrates, reported that it was the custom for younger women to practice martial arts and serve as active soldiers, while older women with children would ride to war only in emergencies.¹³

A strong bond of sisterhood was another famous Amazon trait, sometimes interpreted today as a sexual preference for women. The image of Amazons as man-hating lesbians is a twentieth-century twist, however. No ancient account mentions this possibility—and the Greeks

and Romans were certainly never shy about discussing male or female homosexuality. Hellanikos, a contemporary of Herodotus, described Amazons as “man-loving.” Numerous other Greek and Roman writers agreed that Amazons were eager sexual partners with chosen male lovers and that they sometimes formed long-term relationships with men (chapter 8). The Amazons’ sexual activity with men is underscored by the fact that only three Amazons—Alkippe, Sinope, and Orithyia—were singled out as remarkable because of their vows of virginity.¹⁴

Verdict: man-killers on the battlefield but not man-haters, Amazons were modeled on stories of self-confident women of the steppe cultures who fought for glory and survival and enjoyed male companionship, but on terms that seemed extraordinary to the ancient Greeks.

SYMBOLIC FIGURES?

Archaeological evidence shows that Eurasian women fitting the description of mythic Amazons were contemporaries of the ancient Greeks. Warlike women of the steppes also appear in the traditions of non-Hellenic cultures. Yet the idea that Amazons were fantasy figures conjured up by Greek men to reflect anxiety-fraught aspects of their own Hellenic culture still holds sway. Amazons in Greek art are interpreted as illustrations of myth, not reality. This view is expressed in a recent off-the-cuff comment by a leading art historian: “It is useless to say anything about what the Amazons really were, because they were not *really* anything.”¹⁵

So many diverse meanings are projected onto Amazons that it is impossible to do them all justice here. Amazons have been interpreted as negative role models for Greek women; as repulsive monsters or “Others” who threatened the Greek masculine ego; as figures justifying gender inequality or expressing fears of female rebellion against male oppression; as enemies of civilization; as symbols of wild, animal-like sexuality; as women who refuse to grow up and accept marriage and childbirth; as asexual “un-women”; as political stand-ins for inferior barbarians, “effeminate” Persians, or foreign wives of Athenian citizens; as representations of pubescent Greek girls or teenage Greek boys; and as an inside-out, upside-down mirror of Hellenic culture.¹⁶

Some interpretations are incompatible with ancient and modern evidence. For example, Amazons have been paired with Centaurs as unruly forces of uncivilized Nature. But unlike the drunken, priapic half-horse–half-men of myth whose crude weapons were boulders and uprooted trees, Amazons were said to tame horses, form orderly warrior societies, use iron weapons, wear tailored clothing, control their own sexuality, manifest historical progress, carry out strategic warfare, and found important cities. Amazons as loathsome “Others” is hard to reconcile with the positive ways they were actually portrayed in antiquity. Greeks imagined many truly repugnant female monsters—Medusa, Echidna, Scylla, Harpies—but Amazons were consistently depicted as admirable, athletic, beautiful, sexually desirable, valiant women who embodied the same traits that distinguished heroic Greek males. Seeking unconscious metaphors in mythological stories can spark insights about ancient Greek psychology. But explaining Amazons as wholly make-believe figures created by Greeks for Greeks has resulted in a log-jam of competing theories. Thanks to archaeology, the tide is beginning to turn and Amazons are at last achieving “historical respectability.”¹⁷

Yet many still believe that the Greek psyche summoned mythic Amazons into existence so they could be killed off. Amazons “exist [only] in order . . . to be defeated”; they have no history, “no future,” and the heroic warrior status to which they aspire is “impossible.”¹⁸ It’s true that Amazons do end up killed by Greek heroes in the major myths. But is it any wonder that Greek national myths would show their own heroes triumphing over powerful foreign enemies? Greek heroes crush foes, male and female alike, from Medusa to the Trojans. More significant is that the myths invariably feature equally matched Greek and Amazon antagonists. Akin to the noble heroes of Troy bested by Greek champions in the *Iliad*, each Amazon fighter is just as brave as the hero she confronts. In Greek vase paintings, the outcome is often suspenseful: Amazons are shown fighting and dying courageously, and some are even shown killing Greek warriors. Amazons in Greek art are always depicted running *toward* danger, never fleeing (as Persians sometimes were). Out of more than 550 vase paintings of fighting Amazons, fewer than 10 show Amazons gesturing for mercy. Combat with an Amazon foe requires a fair match; otherwise there can be no honor for the ultimate Greek victor.¹⁹

AMAZON AS HEROES

In the Greek myths Amazons always die young and beautiful. But a short, splendid life and violent death in battle was the perfect *heroic* ideal in myth. Indeed, this destiny (*kleos aphthiton*, “imperishable glory”) was what every great Greek hero craved for himself—the “beautiful death” was supposed to guarantee eternal fame and glory. The heroic spirit—“If our lives be short, let our fame be great”—was also the choice of the heroes and heroines in the Nart sagas of the Caucasus. The many wounded and dead Amazons depicted in classical Greek art are invariably beautiful and brave (the only difference is that they are not shown “heroically nude” like male heroes; see chapter 7).²⁰ One cannot help but notice that in the Greek myths *and* in semihistorical accounts, nearly every Amazon we know by name displays exemplary heroic attributes and achieves honor by dying heroically in battle.

In fact, what is truly surprising about Amazons is the realization that these non-Greek women actually *surpass* the Greek mythic heroes in the manner of their deaths. Despite their vaunted courage and might, not one great Greek hero manages to achieve a glorious death on the battlefield.²¹ Perseus, the slayer of Medusa, dies of old age. Bellerophon, thrown by his flying horse, Pegasus, into a thornbush, ends up a blind, lame hermit. Theseus, Athens’s founding hero? Shoved off a cliff by an elderly king. Odysseus? Accidentally done in by his son, stabbed with a stingray spine. The superhero Heracles perishes ignominiously, wrapped in a poisoned tunic, a gift from his wife. The mighty Achilles is felled by an arrow in the heel, shot from behind. Jason, leader of the Argonauts—crushed in his sleep by a rotten beam from his old ship, the *Argo*.

The quintessentially heroic credentials of Amazons make it difficult to see them as objects of contempt or victims in a tragedy of ancient misogyny. Instead, Amazons of myth represented worthy human adversaries for Greek heroes. The heroic status of Amazons is evident in a striking painting of the Trojan War on an Etruscan vase (ca. 330 BC). The Etruscans, a mysterious Italian civilization that flourished from about 700 BC until they were absorbed by the Romans in what is now Tuscany, were very familiar with Greek myths, but they also had their own tales. Etruscan women enjoyed relatively liberated lives compared to Greek women. On one side of the vase Achilles is killing a Trojan.

The other side shows an Amazon mourning as the ghosts of two bandaged and cloaked Amazons enter the Underworld as heroes. They are labeled “Pentasila” (Penthesilea) and “hinthi (A)turmucas.” *Hinthi* is Etruscan for “soul or shade”; *(A)turmuca* is the Etruscan version of either Andromache (“Manly Fighter”) or Dorymache (“Spear Fighter”). The Amazons’ bandages are artistic shorthand for their having died violently and honorably in battle. Andromache is a known Amazon name, but this would be the only instance of an Amazon named Aturmuca/Dorymache (although there is an Amazon named Enchesimargos, “Spear Mad”).²² Was there once a popular Greek or Etruscan story, now lost, that associated this heroine with Penthesilea’s band of Amazons at Troy?

A stunning discovery in 2013 suggests that warrior women existed among the Etruscans. Inside a rock-cut tomb in ancient Tarquinia (ca. 620 BC), archaeologists found a skeleton holding a spear; the burned remains of another person lay nearby. Jewelry, a bronze sewing box, and a painted Corinthian perfume/oil flask accompanied the pair. The spear led the archaeologists to identify the skeleton as a warrior prince buried with his cremated wife. But DNA bone analysis soon revealed that the lance belonged to a woman aged 35–40 and the ashes belonged to a man of 20–30. (Preconceptions about “masculine” and “feminine” grave goods have led archaeologists to make a host of similar errors; scientific osteological testing is overturning these biases; see chapter 4).²³

Amazons in classical literature were *human*, with desires, flaws, virtues, ambitions, and vulnerabilities similar to those attributed to mortal Greek heroes. Moreover—like the greatest Greek heroes—each famous Amazon queen was the protagonist of her own mythic biography, which generated multiple alternative versions. Like the tales of Theseus, Hercules, Achilles, and Atalanta, the many different stories of individual Amazons were filled with great challenges, adventures, victories, and loss.

A PURELY GREEK INVENTION?

Western scholars often take it for granted that Amazons were the exclusive creative property of the ancient Greeks. “It is important to stress that these foreign heroes existed only in Greek myth and not in native

mythic traditions,” is how one classicist expresses the claim. Another states that “Amazons are not represented in cultures based on non-Greek emblems and norms.” But this unexamined assumption turns out to be false.²⁴ The belief that Amazons existed only in Greek culture has led classicists to maintain that all Amazon figures in Greek art and literature were doomed cardboard figures created to fill conceptual, symbolic niches for the Greeks. Such a Hellenocentric claim is disproved by literary, historical, artistic, linguistic, and archaeological evidence for warlike women of ancient Scythia in a wide range of other ancient cultures. Even the tendency to view Amazon figures as purely symbolic is not confined to classical Greek scholarship. The classicists’ interpretation of Amazons as symbols unknowingly recapitulates the interpretations of some modern religious Islamicist scholars, who make similar claims about Amazon-like women in ancient Persian literature (chapter 23).²⁵

So the Greeks did *not* invent the idea of Amazons. But a stark difference *does* distinguish the main Greek *mythic script* from other Amazon traditions in antiquity. In the Greek myths, Greek heroes always destroy Amazons. Psychosocial explanations focus on the drastic scenes of violence toward strong foreign women in Greek myth and art.²⁶ Greek myths are unique in their insistence on death to Amazons, but this focus misses a bigger story. The mythic formula is radically at odds with the more realistic, evenhanded descriptions of Amazon warrior women by Greco-Roman historians, geographers, and ethnographers, and their accounts share much in common with the tales of non-Greek cultures that met Scythian horse archers on the battlefield. In these more realistic scenarios, warlike women can forge alliances with former enemies, have male companions, fall in love, have children, and sometimes win and sometimes lose in love and war.

Surprisingly, even in the dark archaic Greek myths one can detect glimmers of other options. Traces of alternative story lines in vase paintings and fragments of Greek literature hint that peaceful interactions, even romance, might have been possible outcomes. In the Greek myths about Amazons that have come down to us, war always triumphs over love. But *outside* Greek mythology, and *beyond the Greek world*, women warriors and male warriors might make love and war together as equals—and even live happily ever after.

THREE CATEGORIES OF AMAZONS

In untangling the myths and realities of warrior women of antiquity, at least three categories of “Amazons” emerge (and sometimes converge). In the contexts of history, Greek mythology, and non-Greek settings, the women we call Amazons fall into the following groups.

1. *Real nomadic horsewomen archers of the steppes.* The historical reality of Amazon-like women contemporary with the ancient Greeks is now fully documented by archaeological evidence. The lives of these once-living counterparts of mythic and legendary Amazons are accessible to us through excavations of burials, scientific analysis of bodily remains and grave goods, comparative ethnological studies, linguistics, and historical sources both ancient and modern.

2. *Amazon queens Hippolyte, Antiope, and Penthesilea and other Amazons of classical mythology.* The adventures and biographies of warrior women who battled Greeks took shape in the storytelling imagination interwoven with strands of reality from the domain of steppe nomads. In the major myths about Greeks versus Amazons, despite their bravery, erotic appeal, and prowess the women are almost always killed or captured.

3. *Women warriors in non-Greek traditions from the Black Sea to China.* Amazon-like heroines appear in Egyptian romances, Persian legends, epic traditions of the Caucasus and Central Asia, and Chinese chronicles. These non-Greek stories diverge from the grim Greek mythic script that doomed Amazons to defeat and death. Among the cultures the Greeks designated as “barbarian,” myths, legends, and historical accounts express great pride in their own heroic warrior women who won victories over men and survived to fight again. When non-Greek societies faced female fighters among their enemies, many tales recount how they eagerly sought to have these Amazons as lovers, companions, and allies instead of killing them.



After Heracles, Amazons were the single most popular subjects in Greek vase paintings. Amazons appeared in city murals and monumental civic sculptures in Athens and other Greek cities; tombs and places



FIG. 1.1. Left, Amazon doll with helmet, articulated arms and legs, terra-cotta, fifth century BC, Greek, Aegina, Inv. CA955, Musée de Louvre, Paris. Photo: Gerard Blot. © RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource, NY. Right, Amazon doll with articulated legs, dressed as a hoplite, terra-cotta, signed MAECIUS, Asia Minor, Inv. CA1493, Musée de Louvre, Paris. © Musée de Louvre, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais/Les frères Chuzeville/Art Resource, NY.

linked to Amazons were revered in the Greek and Anatolian landscape. Some of the most poignant and little-known ancient artifacts are dolls representing Amazons, discovered in the graves of young girls in Greece and Asia Minor. Had the little girls lived to be married, they would have dedicated these dolls to the goddess Artemis. Clay dolls in the Louvre and other collections are identified as Amazons by their pointed Scythian-style caps with lappets (earflaps), like the caps of many Amazons in Greek art, and by their armor and weapons. The doll on the left in figure 1.1 was made Athens in 450–400 BC. She is six inches tall, and her molded hair and helmet were once brightly painted. (Early artistic

images of Amazons have helmets like those of Greek hoplites; the goddess Athena often wears a similar helmet, but a nude Athena doll is unlikely.) Movable arms and legs allowed the owner to dress this doll in miniature Amazon-style clothing. The doll on the right was discovered in a young girl's grave in Roman-era Asia Minor. About ten inches tall, she wears an imposing helmet, with long hair curling over her shoulder. She is dressed as a classical Amazon, in a belted tunic that exposes one breast, with a studded belt around her waist and across her chest. Articulated legs allow her to "walk." Her broken arm held a bow, spear, or shield. This doll is a remarkable find, for it bears the signature of its maker, Maecius.²⁷ Whether these dolls were treasured toys or ritual figures, the fact that Amazon figurines belonged to girls is striking. They suggest that Amazons were female models available to young women in the classical world.

Did men, women, or both tell the earliest tales—oral traditions—about Amazons and their living counterparts on the steppes? It does not really matter, since the stories spread throughout Hellenic society and every listener—men and women, boys and girls—could understand the message of equality extended to barbarians and even women. Amazon myths and legends offered a vision impossible in Greek society but rumored to exist in a faraway land called Scythia, the Amazon homeland.