

The Amazons, the Contribution of a Greek Myth to the Patriarchal Imaginary

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Among the numerous myths we find in the Mediterranean area and that have given the West many elements present in its mentality and imaginary is that of the Amazons. It is a myth of Greek origin that forges values such as the masculine-feminine or civilisation-barbarism dualities and refers to the matriarchal system taken to its ultimate consequences. The Amazons were women without husbands (or with husbands that stayed at home and carried out their wives' orders, according to the version of the Libyan Amazons) and who only kept their daughters while they abandoned or killed their sons. They were warrior women, who cultivated the land and worked in agriculture, according to different versions. All of them, however, possess a clear common element: they are women not subject to the control of men and, therefore, oppose the patriarchal system.

The Mediterranean is a laboratory with a long history that has given the West and other sister civilisations much of the existing mentality. We are not only talking about the three great religions, but also a broad and powerful imaginary. In relation to Classical Greece, Mary R. Lefkowitz notes that the most important legacy of the Greeks is not, as thought, democracy, but their mythology (Lefkowitz, 1986). Moreover, the Hellenist William Blake Tyrrell (1989) argues that, in the known world, many of the stereotypes that have survived for centuries were forged by Greeks almost three thousand years ago.

Myths are distant cosmogonies. Many legends become foundational elements whose meaning is related to the legitimatisation of a place or a lineage or with the celebration of

a hero. However, the pragmatic function of the myth implies that myths are the basis of certain social structures and explain that a situation is one way or another. Their etiological character is important: that is, knowing how a determined situation was reached.

The Amazons are a Greek myth of great significance in which values as important as the masculine-feminine or civilised-barbaric dualities are shaped. The issue of the Amazons also forms part of the mythical system of the matriarchy, taken to its ultimate consequences. Women without husbands, bad mothers, as they only keep the daughters and are capable of killing their own sons or mutilating them. What is behind all of this? What has awakened this myth and what reality does it conceal?



Olympia, Greece (IEMed Collection).

Scholars have tried to determine if the Amazons existed or, if not, which peoples inspired the myth.

The Amazons are an obligatory reference for Greek geographers and historians, especially those that have studied both the myth of the origins and the ethnographic descriptions of other neighbouring peoples. From Homer to the historiography of Herodotus, Strabo, Pompeius Trogus and the speculations of Diodorus Siculus and Hippocrates, the issue was addressed by those authors who, indebted to history and culture, considered that part of their lineage could be found in the peoples with Amazonian characteristics in the hidden corners of the Mediterranean, as in the case of the Goths. They flourished again in the Iberian Peninsula, in the medieval chronicles, as a myth of the origins through the *Getica* by the 6th century historian Jordanes and in the *Historia General de España*, by Alfonso X the Wise. First, Jordanes interprets

the myth within its cultural transmission (Amazons, Scythians, Getae, Visigoths, Romans... specifically trying to link multiculturalism through women). This interpretation is then resumed by the Castilians in relation to their tradition, based on an emic-etic concept; in other words, from inside and outside of culture.

All the reflections made, including that of different periods of civilisation that would result from contact with the New World from the 16th century by the missionaries, and in the 19th century by the jurists, have been provided in history or fiction by the Greek classics. For José Acosta, author of *Historia natural y moral de las Indias*, published in Seville in 1550 – and translated almost immediately into French and English –, except in terms of religion, the Greco-Roman world continued to be the norm of civilisation. 19th century evolutionism, structural in its way, brought an early secularisation to Joseph-François Lafitau's approach. In 1861, J.J. Bachofen, a German jurist and great expert on Greco-Latin texts, published in Stuttgart *Das Mutterrecht*, which, together with the works by the anthropologist Morgan about matrilineal societies of some American tribes, was used by Frederic Engels to write *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*.

In our globalised imaginary, the classics are those that explain and name the Amazons, setting out their characteristics, typical of barbarian peoples, always in opposition to the patriarchy and, therefore, as a hateful system to be abolished. There is no proof of their existence as “people” but there is of the role of women as inspiration for positive and negative myths, as 1970s feminist anthropology later explained.

In the original myth, the Amazons are daughters of Ares and Harmonia and are governed by a queen, but it is not always so. Different sources suggest different types of Amazons:

- Libyan Amazons, where men have a secondary role and only carry out servile tasks;

- Amazons of the Caucasus, who when they want to perpetuate the race lay with foreigners. They only keep the daughters, as they give the sons to the men they mate with;
- Some authors say that the sons were immediately killed and others that they kept some after mutilating them (blind or lame);
- Other versions, in contrast, explain a type of uxori-local marriage, in which men live in their wife's village or house. An example of this case would be the Amazons of Pontus, originating the Sarmatians-Scythians.

The most interesting aspect is that this matriarchy taken to the limit never contemplates the biological aspect; that is, that giving birth is an impediment to carrying out the most dangerous work. The idea of the weak and, therefore, subjugated sex vanishes from the myth. Therefore, the sociological and ideological aspect is a concern, and this is an important premise because the myth features a war of the sexes and, at the same time, values that will be different, according to the era and ideological position of the narrator.

The Passage from Myth to Reality

The Athenians attributed the establishment of marriage to Cecrops, first mythical king of Athens. Varro (1st century BC) tells the myth of Cecrops to explain how Athens received its name: "When Cecrops was king," he says, "an olive tree and a spring suddenly appeared in the Acropolis. Apollo told him the olive tree was the sign of Athena and the spring, the sign of

Poseidon; the people had to decide which god they preferred as the city patron."

After receiving the oracle, Cecrops called on all citizens, of both sexes, to vote – it was the custom at that time for women to participate in public deliberations. The men voted for Poseidon and the women for Athena. As there was one more woman than men, Athena won. Poseidon, furious, destroyed Attica with his waves. To placate his anger, Varro says that women were punished in three ways: they could no longer vote, no newborn would take the name of its mother, and no one would call women Athenians. This story explains why women were not citizens.

The Libyan Amazons represent the true matriarchy: the Greek world inverted. The men stayed at home and carried out the orders of their wives

Aristophanes (5th century BC) is author of the comedy *Assembly of Women*, in which he satirises these aspects. Perhaps Diodorus Siculus (1st century BC) was inspired by this play to talk about the Libyan Amazons, who he presents as the most ancient of the Amazons, several generations before the Trojan War. The Libyan Amazons represent the true matriarchy: the Greek world inverted. The men stayed at home and carried out the orders of their wives. They were not in the army, did not participate in the magistracies and could not speak in the assembly (*parrhesia*) about city affairs, a right that would have made them presumptuous and led them to rebel against the women. However, Diodorus' Amazons go to war when they are virgins, but not when they have children.¹ In

1. The existence of warrior women in Africa, between Berbers and Black Africans (Dahomey-Nigeria) takes us back to the Amazons of Libya, also cited by Herodotus and described by Diodorus. In Book IV of *The History of Herodotus*, Herodotus refers to the Amazonian games played in Lake Tritonis – the most like localisation hypothesis is the current Chott el Djerit, in the Great Sirte. The Berber culture historian Gabriel Camps told me that today there are similar rituals among the youths in this area. For Strabo, the dress of the god Athena was of Libyan origin, just like the high-pitched screams uttered by women in her temple (Book IV, CLXVIII).

this respect they resemble the Greeks in relation to the age group for doing military service, like the Ephebos.

The Amazons are continuously defeated in different mythical and historical eras to reconstitute order. In one way or another Greco-Latin authors frequently prolong the existence of the Amazons – albeit with a small stronghold after the annihilation – until the historical period, as in this way they try to relate the “archaeology” with the ethnographical description. In this respect, as Carlier-Détienne argues, different combinations are possible. In Herodotus, the passage from archaeology to ethnography goes from radical Amazonism to an almost normal contemporary situation. At first they were Amazons, then women of the Sarmatians, warriors but wives. In sharp contrast, for Pompeius Trogus (Roman historian from the Augustus era), from ordinary wives, after a disastrous historic denouement they are brought back to past eras, becoming typical Amazons, that is without men, and survived as such until the era of Alexander, or Caesar himself.

The stories that have helped forge the myth of the Amazons include:

- Herodotus (6th century BC) explains the origin of the Sarmatians and their peculiar customs by introducing the Amazons of Pontus and the marriage pact with the Scythians. Marriage is monogamous; there is no domination or differentiation of the sexes; the men inherit from their parents and go to live with the Amazons. Archaeology has long been exhuming graves of warrior women that belonged to peoples where the women also used weapons, just like men.
- Ephorus (4th century BC) explains that the Amazons, offended by their husbands, took advantage of an expedition to seize power. They killed the men who stayed behind and rejected those who returned from the expedition (a work known by Polybius, Strabo and Diodorus).
- Hippocrates’s Amazons are different from Herodotus’ because for the first time in history the cauterisation of the right breast appears in literary and ideological tradition – consider that for Aristotle the woman is a mutilated male (*On the Generation of Animals*, II, 3, 737) –, a tradition that never appears in the figurative history, as in the different Amazonomachy, or struggles against the Amazons, which appear in friezes and sarcophaguses. Moreover, the cauterisation of a breast and the development of the arm could be a representation that they are not real women; however, some mythographs say that the Amazons stop going to war when they have children.
- Strabo describes the Amazons of the Caucasus having intercourse in summer periods with the Gargareans. The Amazons keep their daughters, while the sons are given to the fathers.² The Strabo’s Amazons work the land and possess flocks.

2. Strabo (XI, 5, 1): “But others, among whom are Metrodorus of Scepsis and Hypsicrates, who themselves, likewise, were not unacquainted with the region in question, say that the Amazons live on the borders of the Gargarians, in the northerly foothills of those parts of the Caucasian Mountains which are called Ceraunian; that the Amazons spend the rest of their time off to themselves, performing their several individual tasks, such as ploughing, planting, pasturing cattle, and particularly in training horses, though the bravest engage mostly in hunting on horseback and practise warlike exercises; that the right breasts of all are seared when they are infants, so that they can easily use their right arm for every needed purpose, and especially that of throwing the javelin; that they also use bow and sagaris and light shield, and make the skins of wild animals serve as helmets, clothing, and girdles; but that they have two special months in the spring in which they go up into the neighbouring mountain which separates them and the Gargarians. The Gargarians also, in accordance with an ancient custom, go up thither to offer sacrifice with the Amazons and also to have intercourse with them for the sake of begetting children, doing this in secrecy and darkness, any Gargarian at random with any Amazon; and after making them pregnant they send them away; and the females born are retained by the Amazons themselves, but the males are taken to the Gargarians to be brought up; and each Gargarian to whom a child is brought adopts the child as his own, regarding the child as his son because of his uncertainty.”

- Diodorus Siculus talks of the Libyan Amazons, whose behaviour is the social inverse of the Greeks.
- Quintus Curtius Rufus (1st century), in the *History of Alexander*, tells the mythical story of the union of the queen of the Amazons, Thalestris, with Alexander, and recalls in this story the system of the Amazons of the Caucasus (Strabo), as the queen says to Alexander, after having had intercourse, that if she has a boy she will give it to him and if it is a girl, she will keep it.
- For Philostratus, the Amazons feed their babies (girls) milk from mares bred in herds. They do not know how to sail a boat, but are the first to know how to ride a horse; they are familiar with metalworking and have good weapons.
- The late Greco-Latin histories of Cassiodorus and, finally, the story of the Getae-Goths and their link with the Amazons, via Jordanes' account. In the latter, the Amazons are a cultural bridge to the multiple peoples that in the story appear in the confines of the eastern Mediterranean. They are treated positively, despite admitting their excesses.
- The Castilians introduce the Amazons into their genealogy, via the Visigoths, just as Jordanes did. "On the women of the Goths who were named Amazons" is the epigraph that appears in the *Primera crónica general de España* by Alfonso X. The vision is positive: "They were good mothers who had to make an effort because they had many wars and vicissitudes and were alone."

Theories about the Existence of the Amazons

William Blake Tyrrell (1989), in his study on the Amazons, insists on the use of the inversion of traditional gender roles by the Athenian patriarchy as a myth. In this theory he

coincides with the French Hellenist François Hartog (1991) about otherness, as he suggests that Strabo, in his attempt to differentiate historians from mythographers in relation with the episodes of the Amazons, admits that the separation between the true and the monstrous was not achieved. This failure indicates that the myth was narrated by later writers in the same way as earlier ones, even when a "monstrous" inversion of the sexual roles caused surprise: the Amazons were women who did what men do. For Tyrrell this could be no other way: "The attempt to separate fact from fantasy failed because, without inversions, nothing remains."

Strabo describes the mountain peoples of the Iberian Peninsula as a gynocratic regime, given the different lifestyle of Greek patriarchal society: women dedicated to agriculture, the practice of the couvade and other aspects linked to property and inheritance

However, as other specialists have also seen, some descriptions are more realistic than others. Herodotus explained that, among other barbarian peoples, the women had a power equal to that of men (IV, 26). Strabo describes the mountain peoples of the Iberian Peninsula as a gynocratic regime, given the different lifestyle of Greek patriarchal society: women dedicated to agriculture, the practice of the *couvade* and other aspects linked to property and inheritance.

The realistic theories affirm the existence of the Amazons, although they do not advocate that everything written by the ancients is pure truth, which would be impossible, as they contradict each other. They argue that in certain eras or places there have been one or several groups of warrior women whose features are explained by the ancient tales. For example, the description of these types of warrior women in

Francisco de Orellana's account of his journey to the Indies.

Some of the visual representations, especially in the Attic vases, show the Amazons wearing pants, tunic and the cap of the Scythians. A distinctive feature of the Sarmatians, a nomad people related to the Scythians, the Maedi and the Persians, from the Aral Sea and who settled on the Caucasus, seemed to be that women were trained for war. Archaeology, corroborating the classical authors, has discovered weapons in many women's graves.

Tyrrhel admits that "long before the Persian wars, the Amazons were in Asia. The Persians and the Ionic Greeks lived in Asia and, after the war, ideas that contributed to the myth emerged among Athenians about both of them." Pierre Samuel, in his classic book about the Amazons, insists on the theses by W. Leonhard, who argues that there are very close relations between Hittites and Amazons. We must remember that in the *Iliad*, Aphrodite and Artemis, as well as the Amazons, were on the side of the Trojans, as Homer explains. In the real story, Artemisia, the Carian queen, helps the Persians in the Battle of Salamis, and Xerxes says she is the best man he has.

The Necessary Uxorilocality of the Amazons' Husbands

Apart from the Amazons, mothers of the Sarmatians (Scythians), who had husbands and clearly practised uxorilocality, the other Amazons are women who live alone or with men for a short period of the year. Apart from the widowhood exalted by the tragic death of the husbands, as some authors explain, there are other versions that admit the possibility of the existence of these single women at a more realistic level, such as the men spending months outside the territory dedicated to long-distance transhumance or war.

We have interesting information about the Amazons and the Scythians concerning climate, which in winter periods leaves little time for any kind of specific activity. Herodotus, in his explanations, argues that "the Scythians experience an excessive winter both in intensity and length: for eight months, there is an unbearable frost" (Herodotus, IV, 28). If we consult all the Hispanic geographical dictionaries from the 18th century, we find this same quotation applied to the climate of those mountain territories where the men left in seasonal migration to southern lands of the Iberian Peninsula.

In The History of Herodotus on the Amazons having intercourse with the young Sarmatians a misunderstanding takes place: the Scythians almost behave like Greeks, while introducing a series of modifications that will constitute the barbarous peculiarity of the Sauromatae

For François Hartog, in *The History of Herodotus*, the Scythians are the mirror in which the Greeks are reflected inversely; however, in this text about the Amazons having intercourse with the young Sarmatians a misunderstanding takes place: the Scythians almost behave like Greeks, while introducing a series of modifications that will constitute the barbarous peculiarity of the Sauromatae. Because the marital settlement of these youths with the Amazons will not allow them to behave like the adult Greeks. They then suggest that they abandon the peripheral areas to return home to live a normal existence – in this scenario, notes Herzog, this is only understood in relation to Greek marriage when women are going to live in the house of their husbands. The Amazons respond that they would not know how to live like the Scythian women and that this was impossible, also adding: "Go to your parents, receive your share of their possessions, and then return and live with us [...]. The men yielding



Amazonomachy (Halicarnaso, Greece).

to this proposal acted accordingly.” So we see how the difference of custom in relation to the dowry and type of residence is emphasised, this time with matrilineal characteristics, contrary to the Greek patriarchal system.

Bad Mothers and Autochthony: the Scythian Melusine

However, not all elements are purely social. Although the lifestyle adapts the familiar or distant stories, aspects linked to the woman that make her a good or bad mother often appear in this oral or written imaginary. The Amazons, except those married to the Scythians, were bad mothers, because they kept the daughters but abandoned or killed their sons. At an ideological level, bad mothers have a series of negative connotations, linked especially to non-fulfilment of the patriarchal norms.

The Amazons, who, as far as we have seen by analysing different texts, are the women of matrilineal and uxorilocal peoples who spend great deal of time alone, can be warrior women,

hunters and priestesses, but the most important thing is that they are not subject to the social control of men. So they are seen as promiscuous women, bad mothers who have intercourse with foreigners.

They can also be aberrant mothers whose appearance linked to nature gives them an aura of savagery and autochthony, so they will be mastered, after their rape, by the Greek heroes who in this way will introduce their descendants into the civilised world, theirs, as in the case of the *Mixoparthenos*, or Scythian snake woman and the Amazons.

The story of Herodotus tells of the different times that end with the marriage between the young Scythians and the Amazons, and how when the Scythians leave the Amazons by crossing the river Tanais this results in a new territory, which will be that of the Sarmatian line. But there are other mythological versions that recall a certain primitive autochthony linked to the mother.

There are two versions of the origin of the Scythians, always based on the Greco-Latin descriptions. One refers to the arrival of Hercules

to this region and him having intercourse with a snake woman, formed by two natures: the upper, up to the woman's waist, and the lower, reptile (Herodotus, IV, 9). This is a version developed by the Greeks of Pontus and goes back to an older myth told by Hesiod to the figure of Echidna.³ In this case, Herodotus' snake woman is not presented as atrocious or horrible.

This same snake woman appears in Diodorus Siculus (II, 43, 3) but this time linked to Zeus. At the start of his tale about the Scythian peoples he says: "As the Scythians recount the myth, there was born among them a maiden sprung from the earth; the upper parts of her body as far as her waist were those of a woman, but the lower parts were those of a snake (viper). Zeus lay with her and begat a son whose name was Scythes. This son became more famous than any who had preceded him and called the folk Scythians after his own name. Now among the descendants of this king there were two brothers who were distinguished for their valour, the one named Palus and the other Napes. They performed renowned deeds and divided the kingship between them." He speaks of different peoples, such as the Medes, on the coast of the Tanais, the land of the Sarmatians. "Many years later this people became powerful and ravaged a large part of Scythia, and destroying utterly all whom they subdued they turned most of the land into a desert." (Diodorus Siculus, II, XLIV).

After this, there was a power vacuum in Scythia: "Later came women endowed with exceptional valour. For among these peoples the women trained for war just as men do and in acts of manly valour are in no wise inferior to the men." (Ibid.) This time, the story appears as if it were told by the Scythians themselves. This version was resumed in the *Getica* in the 6th century by the Goth Jordanes and reincor-

porated through him by Alfonso X the Wise into the Hispanic line.

In Hesiod's version, Hercules kills the monstrous children of Echidna. With the *Mixoparthenos* he has three children and, for a series of reasons that also appear in other medieval and contemporary European stories, the youngest son gains the territory. In other words, the inverse system to that of the Greeks, where primogeniture predominates.

Moreover, we can recall that in the mythical story of Athens, the first kings of the city, Erechtheus and Cecrops, had the lower part of a snake's body, and in this form they were worshipped in the city; the snake meant *born from the earth* and, therefore, symbolises autochthony.

In the story of the snake woman linked to the origins of the Sarmatians-Scythians we recognise another mythological woman who will have great vitality in the Middle Ages and continued present in the folklore of western Europe: Melusine, who maintains her telluric attribute

The story of Heracles and the double axe and Plutarch's version according to which Heracles took away the sword of Hippolyte, the queen of the Amazons, belong to the myth while the matrilineal peoples who the Greeks gradually subjugate correspond to the real story. See the description of the long journey of Hanon where it explains the social characteristics of the Mediterranean towns that appear on the route.

Undoubtedly, in the story of the snake woman linked to the origins of the Sarmatians-Scythians we recognise another mythological woman who will have great vitality in the Middle Ages and continued present in the folklore

3. Echidna (the viper), according to mythology, is daughter of the Earth (Gea) and Tartarus. From the union with Typhon she gave birth to Cerberus (the three-headed dog that guards the gates of the underworld) (Hesiod, 8th century BC).

of western Europe: Melusine, who maintains her telluric attribute.

The multiple “melusines” are well-known, whose offspring claim their mythical origin, such as the lineage of the Lusignan, the Lords of Biscay, sons of the dame with the foot of a goat, or the Blanchs in Catalonia, whose mother is a *dona d'aigua* who rests in the Gorg Negre. They are all reminiscent, halfway between cultivated and popular, of that divinity, women with a snake's tale as we have seen linked to the birth of the Scythian peoples.

Myths are distant cosmogonies, and many legends are transformed into foundational elements, whose meaning is related to the legitimisation of the possession of a place or a lineage, or with the celebration of a hero

Melusine, therefore, is a pagan figure, sometimes Christianised, who emerged from the water and the earth, as argued by the archaeologist Marija Gimbutas.⁴ In this respect, myths are distant cosmogonies, and many legends are transformed into foundational elements, whose

meaning is related to the legitimisation of the possession of a place or a lineage, or with the celebration of a hero. So we see a certain duality in the monstrous myths related with women. Socially, they must be tamed by the patriarchy, but their monstrous part linked to the earth is what confers the legitimacy of the origin of the lineage of the heroes.

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4. From the beginnings of the Neolithic until Classical Greece, the snake has acquired an anthropomorphic form (Gimbutas, 1991: 107): goddesses of water and air, bird and snake goddesses that will to appear in European stories and legends, and have a long tradition, such as Melusine and the Knight of the Swan.