

The Amazons



Notes About This Text

The rainbows you will see in this chapter are links to an appendix which includes additional information. Click on these links to learn more about the topics discussed in the main text.

Words that have an asterisk next to them are included in a glossary at the end of the chapter. Click on the words to be taken to the glossary.

INTRODUCTION

Key Questions

Who were the Amazons?

Were they just something that Greeks imagined, stories designed to reinforce their ideas about the traditional gender roles* played by men and women in society?

Or were they invented to strengthen xenophobic* stereotypes about foreigners?

Were they based upon historical warrior women?

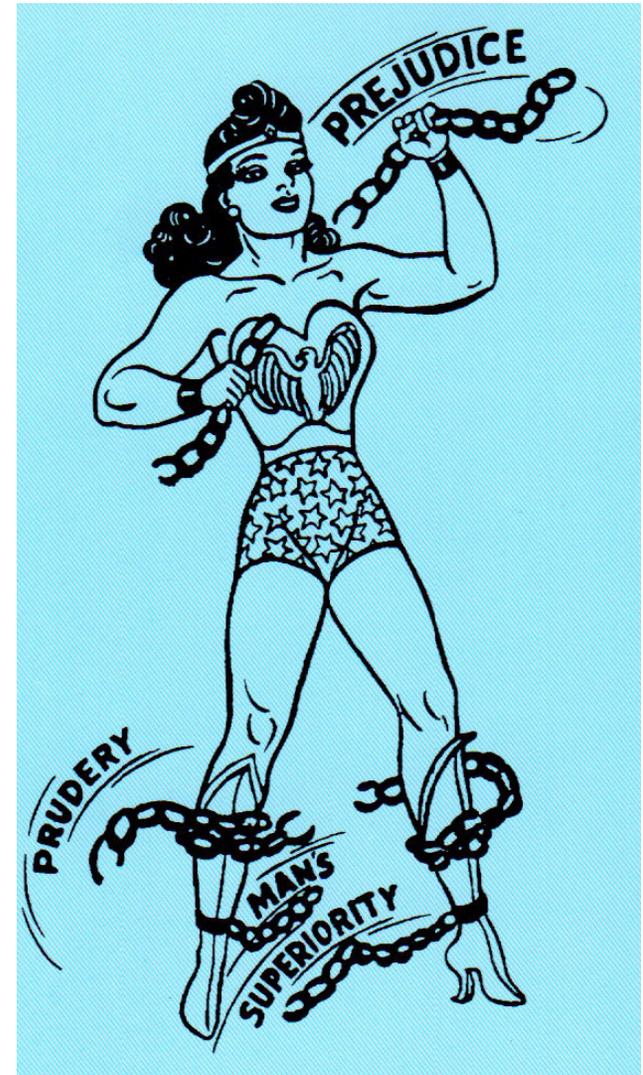
Did the Amazons love other women?

Can we perhaps think of them as trans?

Introduction to the Amazons

As we will see, there are many questions about the Amazons, the answers to which are not always clear. Myths about the Amazons have captured the imagination of writers and artists for thousands of years. This legendary society of mythical warrior women who lived without men was one of the most popular subjects for artists in ancient Greece, and they remain popular today in games and movies about the ancient Mediterranean world, from *Wonder Woman* to *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* and beyond.

In this chapter, you will look in more detail at this society of women and decide for yourself whether ancient Greek stories about the Amazons were more concerned with them as being women who challenged traditional gender roles, or as foreign 'others'*.

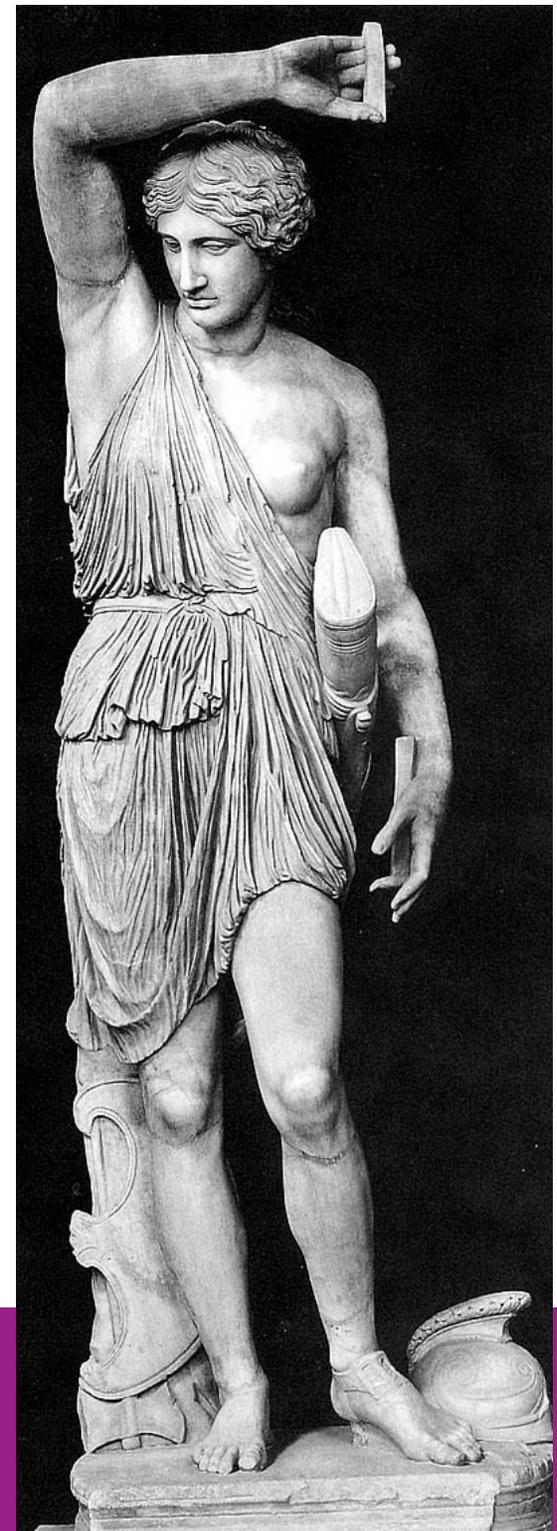


An image from the original *Wonder Woman* comic

What's in a Name?

The original meaning of the word “Amazon” is debated. Some think that it comes from the Ancient Greek a-mazon, which means ‘without a breast’. This definition relates to a story that the Amazons would remove their right breast to help them fight better (they thought that this would cause extra strength to flow into their sword-arm and that it would help them to shoot a bow and arrow). It might also be connected to a refusal to breastfeed babies. Both of these interpretations relate to a key idea about the myth of the Amazons; they represent women who, being non-Greek, challenge typical Greek gender roles,* i.e. how society expected women to act.

Statue of an Amazon
from the Vatican Museum



Others disagree with this origin, pointing out that removing a breast would not make any more strength flow into an arm, and that breasts don't prevent someone from shooting a bow. Others have also pointed out that a mother who removes one breast would still be able to breastfeed a baby and to care for a child with the remaining breast – and the Amazons did raise their female children.

In fact, it is quite likely that the word has a Near Eastern origin — for example, in Persian (modern day Iran) ha-mazon means warrior. Perhaps the name a-mazon, if it does mean 'without a breast', is more about making the Amazons look and feel different, strange and 'other'* in comparison to Greek women. So even the name 'Amazon' introduces two key ideas: gender* and otherness*.

THE AMAZONS AND GENDER

How might the ancient Greeks have thought about Amazons and gender?*

While it's difficult to know for sure, it seems likely that many Greeks would have believed that the Amazon way of life, as portrayed in the stories told about them, was the total opposite of the Greek way of life. To understand why, you will first need to learn a little about Greek patriarchy* and the narrow roles that Greek women were expected to play within their families and in public.

Greek Women in Greek Society

WOMEN

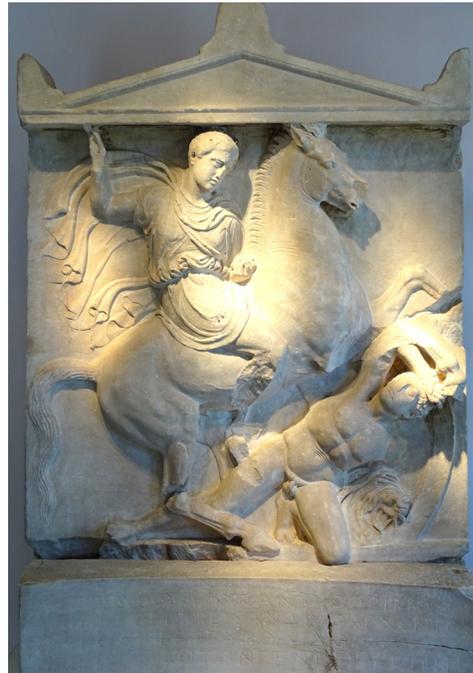
VS.

MEN

Our best evidence for women's lives in Greece comes from Athens. Athenian women were not citizens. They did not play any role in politics, but managed the household and did domestic work, such as cooking, cleaning, preserving food and weaving cloth. Married women were also expected to conceive and bear children so that the male head of household (kyrios) would have heirs to inherit his property. Women would also be expected to play an active role in raising the children of the family.

By contrast, citizen men in Athenian society were supposed to spend the majority of their time outside of the household. They would occupy themselves working at their business, craft or farm, socialising and training at the gymnasium. All Athenian citizen men were expected to be actively involved in politics at the Assembly and all would serve in the army as soldiers.

We can see this stark difference in gender roles* in Athens by studying the grave stones which commemorate men and women, who are portrayed in very different ways, with respect to how they are dressed, and the activities they are doing:



Why do you think men and women were portrayed differently in these gravestones?

What do these differences show about the roles men and women played in Athenian society?

This 'ideal' of Greek society where men spent time in public and women were confined to the private space of the home did not apply to everyone. Some women had important jobs outside of their homes, for instance as priestesses. Poorer families might not have been able to afford to keep all girls and women at home, and so it is likely that girls and women from these families would have gone outside to earn money. They might be servants or provide entertainment at dinner parties, etc. Enslaved women made it possible for this ideal to exist.

Still, the ideal for Greek women of the citizen class was to remain indoors and out of sight.

Pericles, one important Athenian politician, reportedly said, 'A woman's reputation is highest when men say little about her, whether it be good or evil'.

The Amazons' Defiance of Accepted Norms

DOMESTIC LIVES

If Greek women were kept indoors looking after men's property and bearing heirs for men, then the mythical Amazon women broke this norm entirely. In many ways the Amazons blended stereotypically 'masculine' activities with female bodies, and so Greeks may have seen them as transgressing against (i.e. crossing the boundaries of) expected gender roles*.



Frieze depicting the Greeks fighting the Amazons

In most versions of the Amazon myth, the Amazons rejected men entirely, living in a women-only society. The Greek playwright, Aeschylus, called them 'man-hating', 'man-killing' warriors and claimed that they lived without men. The Greek author Ephorus said that the Amazons formed a female-only society because they were ill-treated by men: 'The Amazons were treated insolently by their husbands, and, when some of the men went to war, the Amazons killed those left behind and refused entrance to those returning'. Later, in the Roman period, Pompeius Trogus says that the Amazons, after ridding themselves of their husbands, decided never to remarry: 'They had no desire to marry their neighbours, calling this enslavement, not matrimony.' [Click here to read the complete passage.](#)



Some other accounts suggest that Amazons lived alongside men, but that they inverted traditional gender roles,* with women in charge of men. For instance, Diodorus Siculus, an ancient Greek historian, tells us that the Amazons did live with men, but rather than being dominated by them, became the dominators in a matriarchal* fashion. The Amazon women did the ploughing, farming, hunting, and fighting, while making the men perform household labour. Diodorus says, 'To the men she [their leader] assigned the wool spinning and the other household duties of women. She also introduced laws, on account of which she led the women into contests of war, while she bound the men in humiliation and slavery. With regard to their offspring, they mutilated the legs and arms of the males, rendering them useless for the pursuits of war...'

Yet Diodorus himself and most scholars understand this story to be an inversion of the male-dominated, or patriarchal, society of Athens, and thus a tall tale. Such a story could inspire or encourage men's fear of independent women. Regardless of the individual differences between versions of the myth, all the stories agree that the Amazons did not spend their days doing chores at home on behalf of men. The Amazon women were the ones in charge, both in public and in private.

WARFARE



A vase showing two Amazons holding javelins

In Greek society, it was men who fought in wars, while Greek women stayed at home. The mythical Amazons, however, were warriors first and foremost and therefore did not act in an appropriately feminine way according to Greek ideals. Some myths say that the Amazons were all the daughters of Ares, god of war. This clearly suggests that the Amazons and warfare were closely linked. In the myths, these fierce warrior women defeat many of their non-Greek enemies. Diodorus Siculus also tells the story of Amazons fighting against the Scythians (another society known for its warrior women). He says: 'the nation of the Amazons... was so distinguished for its manly prowess that it not only overran much of the neighbouring territory but even subdued a large part of Europe and Asia.' For the full passage, [click here](#). 

Depictions of Amazons in art (which we will consider in more depth later) typically show them with weapons and armour. See for example this pot (with the Amazon Penthesilea on the right):

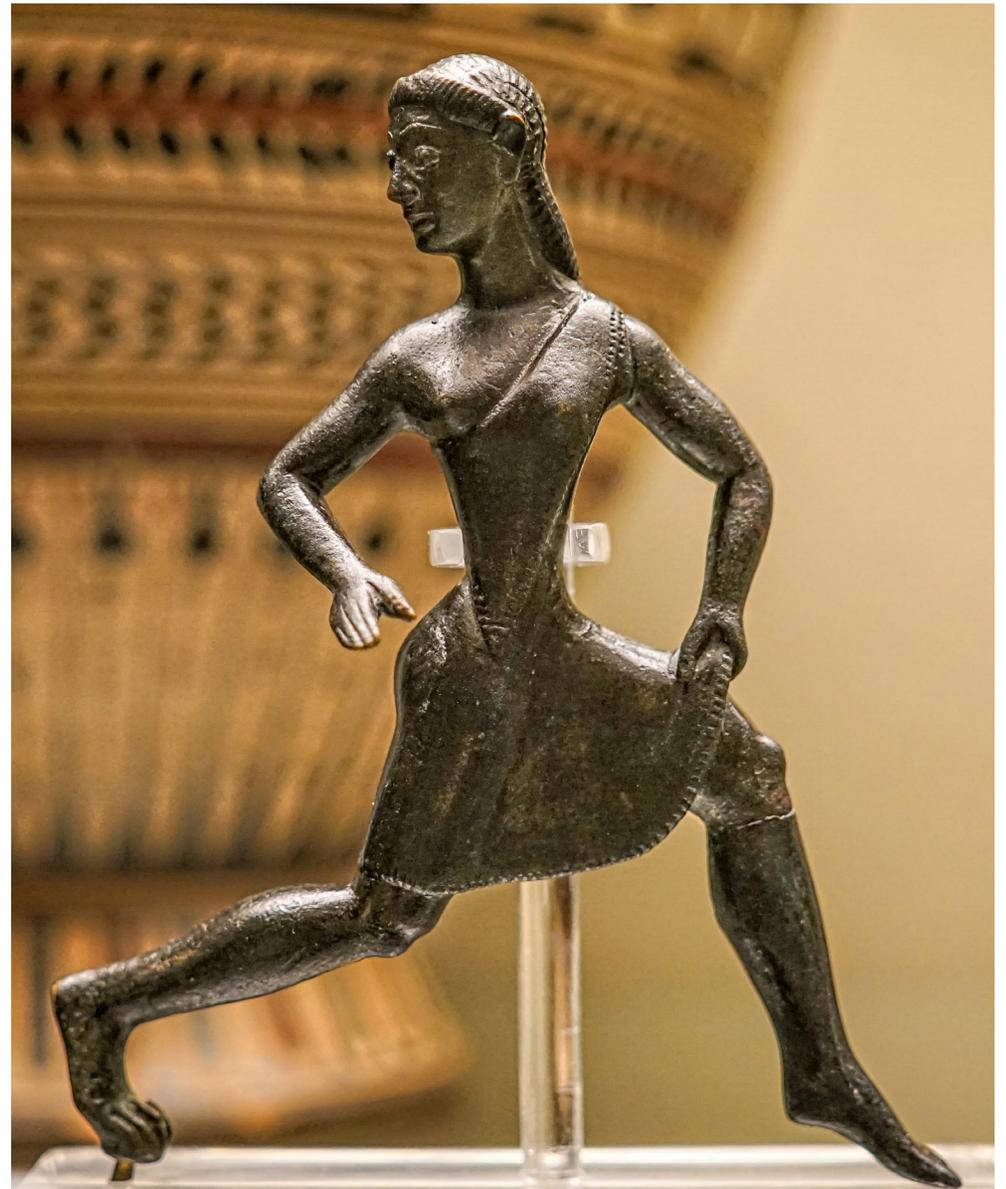


Other popular depictions of the Amazons show them wearing short tunics. See for example this:



These tunics are similar to a type of garment called a chiton, which Greek men would typically wear. The Amazons may have been depicted in this way in order to emphasise their masculine qualities. They are also quite similar to the tunics worn by some Greek girls and women when they danced or competed in sports. See for example this statuette of a girl runner.

Unlike Athenian women, Spartan women were expected to train their bodies so that they would be more likely to have strong and healthy children. It is possible that the Amazons' tunics are a reference to this clothing that would have allowed for freedom of movement in dance or sport, and that they actually did not have anything to do with warfare, and therefore might not tell us much about their **gender** at all!



To sum up, in many ways the Amazons of myth are the opposite of what was expected of typical Greek women. They wore the clothes of men; they fought with and were not subservient to men. Their alleged single-breastedness is often assumed to have aided their fighting, but since that is not accurate, it might instead be a way of emphasising their lack of traditional femininity. Indeed in some ways, when viewed through a modern lens, the Amazons may be interpreted as 'trans', although the term did not yet exist.

It is worth noting that these are Greek portrayals of Amazons, and thus reflect the masculine values of the culture. If they do indeed represent Greek men's fear of independent women, they lead us to ask, 'what chance did a traditional Greek woman stand in a world of men?'

THE AMAZONS AND OTHERNESS

Where Were the Amazons From?

Where was the homeland of the Amazons? This seems like a simple question, but when studying myths, it's very difficult to answer seemingly simple questions. There are hundreds of different sources depicting the Amazons, and they don't all agree!

Here are just a few of the places that Amazons were supposed to have lived:

Libya (modern Tunisia)

Scythia (modern Ukraine), the area in the map on the next page

Sauromatia (southern Russia)

Colchis (modern Georgia & Azerbaijan)

Themiscyra (modern Turkey)

Thrace (modern Northeast Greece, Southern Bulgaria and Northwest Turkey)



[Click here to learn more about each of these places.](#)

The Amazons may be from different places, but they are all 'from elsewhere'. These places, Scythia, Colchis, Sauromatia, and Thrace, are also places where we find evidence of actual warrior women, some buried with weapons. Perhaps the Greeks were drawing on those warriors in their construction of imaginary Amazons. [Click here to learn more about historical warrior women.](#)





As mentioned at the start of this chapter, it is possible that the Greek word 'Amazon' came from a Persian word. Thus it is also possible that the Amazon myth, which was so popular throughout the Greek world, is based on the idea of these women as non-Greek foreigners, with a name that suggested their 'otherness',* or differences from Greeks.

This concept of the 'barbarian' was an important one in Greek culture. To the Greeks, everyone who wasn't Greek was a barbarian.

The Greeks had a very high opinion of themselves, so anyone who was different from them was considered inferior. The word barbarian, which has very negative connotations to this day, is a reflection of these attitudes.

This attitude is clearly stated by Apollonius of Rhodes, who says the Amazons 'were exceedingly savage and knew not that which is right' (Argonautica 2.991-2). The idea that they lack knowledge of what is 'right' implies that the Amazons had either no moral code, or their idea of morality was totally different from that held by the Greeks. This relates to why the idea of the barbarian was so important to Greek culture; it helped the Greeks to define who they were by contrasting themselves with people who were different from them.

What Did the Amazons Look Like?

The Amazons were a very popular subject in ancient Greek art, from vase paintings to sculptures. However, as with written sources which mention the Amazons, there is a lot of disagreement in the visual sources about what the Amazons looked like, which might be worth thinking about.

GREEK WOMEN

But before we look at Amazons in Greek art, let's have a look at a Greek woman, as there are some interesting comparisons to make. The image to the right is of a perfume bottle. The woman is shown wearing a peplos, a long garment which was typical clothing for women in ancient Greece by the 5th century BCE. She is also shown with her hair tied up, and holding a mirror. As you can see, not a lot of her body is visible; in fact there is a focus on the way that her clothing falls in delicate folds over her body.



THE AMAZONS AS WARRIORS

Now let's look at some Amazons. This painting on an oil flask shows an Amazon warrior with her hair loose and flowing. She wears a breastplate to protect her chest and has a quiver for storing her arrows strapped to her back, both of which portray her as a warrior - a stark contrast to the Greek woman above. Rather than wearing a peplos, she also wears a pair of trousers, an item of clothing usually associated with foreigners in Greek art.



Meanwhile, some sculptures, such as the one we saw earlier, and the one to the right, show Amazons wearing tunics rather than trousers. These are very much like the short tunic (called the chiton) worn by Greek men. These images emphasise the idea of the Amazons challenging the traditional gender roles* of men and women.



In addition, this vase painting shows an Amazon warrior in armour that would be worn by a Greek male warrior. Her helmet covers the back of her head and includes cheek guards. This type of helmet is called a Corinthian helmet and was very commonly used by Greeks. She holds a large round shield, known as a hoplon, which most Greek foot soldiers would have used for defence. She doesn't wear trousers, but her shins are protected by a type of armor called greaves, and her torso is protected by a breastplate that seems to be made from metal, not fabric - notice how it flares out at the bottom. So, she is dressed just like a Greek warrior - the only thing that marks her out as different from the male warrior is her white skin, which Greek painters used to show that someone was female.



THE AMAZONS AS 'BARBARIANS'

The vase paintings to the right and on the next page depict Amazon warriors wearing tight-fitting clothing that covers their arms and legs, which is decorated with intricate patterns:





The two images on the previous pages seem strikingly similar to the way that Greek artists depicted the foreign or 'barbarian' Scythians. See for example the first vase painting on the next page; the shape and pattern of the clothing is very similar to the Amazons' outfits. It seems quite likely that the artists were trying to communicate that the Amazons were also foreign, and so they showed them in clothing that a Greek person would have automatically associated with non-Greeks.

Compare also with the second vase painting, which shows a Greek soldier standing over a Persian soldier. The Persian Empire had attempted to invade Greece twice in the late 5th Century BC, and so the Persians were the ultimate 'barbarians' for the Greeks. Notice how the zig-zag pattern on the Persian's clothing is almost identical to that on the Amazon vases. See also how the hat worn by the Persian here is similar not only to the Scythian vase, but also to the second Amazon vase. Could the artists be dressing their Amazons as Persians to show them to be the ultimate mythical barbarians?



We have seen how complex it is to get a clear answer as to what the Amazons looked like. However, one thing is clear: whether depicted wearing patterned clothing associated with foreigners, or clothes and armour associated with Greek men, time and again, depictions of Amazons in Greek art stressed their **'otherness'**, or how they were different from Greek women.

GREEKS VS. AMAZONS

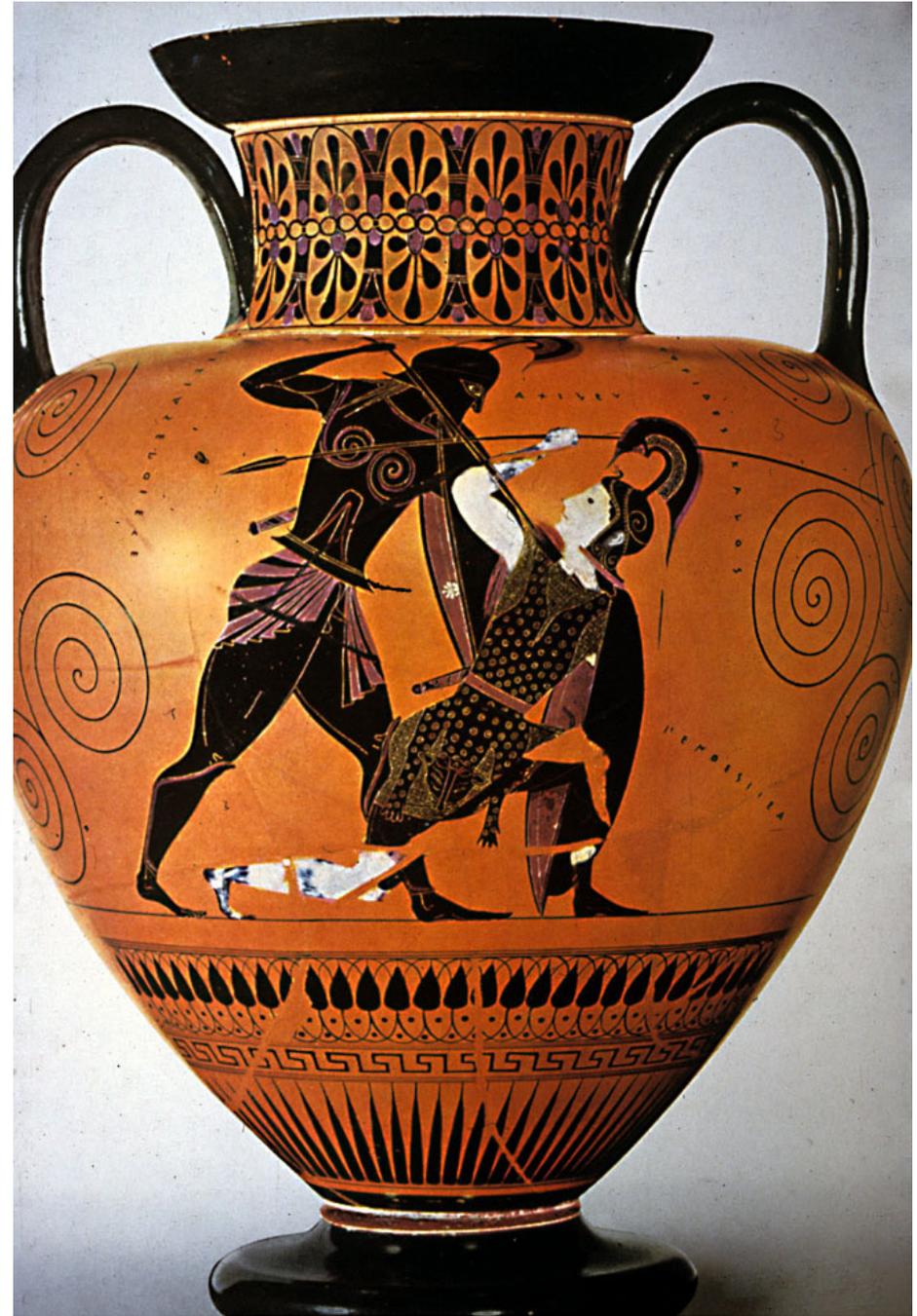
It is important to note that the Amazons, though brave warriors, were usually not victorious against the Greeks.

In fact, defeating an Amazon seems to have been a typical task for famous Greek heroes of myth, for example Achilles, Theseus and Herakles.

The stories that you will read in this section suggest not only an element of hostility between the Greeks and the Amazons, but also the thrill of conquest of the Amazons as masculine woman and outsiders on the part of the Greeks. But is this desire simply erotic or is it about the thrill of conquest?

The Amazons fought in the Trojan War on the side of the Trojans. Homer mentions them in his *Iliad* as 'the equals of men' (*antianeirai*), but Achilles enters into a duel with and kills their queen, Penthesilea (as is depicted on the two vases on the next page). When he sees her face, however, he falls in love with her, indicating the complexity of their relationship.

Similarly, the Athenian hero Theseus attacked the Amazons so that he could abduct an Amazon named Antiope. After the battle, he took her back to Athens. In one version of the myth, she is captured against her will, but in another she goes willingly. In either case, the Amazons attack Athens to take her back. A huge battle follows. So, just like Achilles' story, Theseus' desire for an Amazon is related to violence. Could these myths be a reflection of the patriarchal* society in Greece, in which violence against women was normalised or even eroticised?



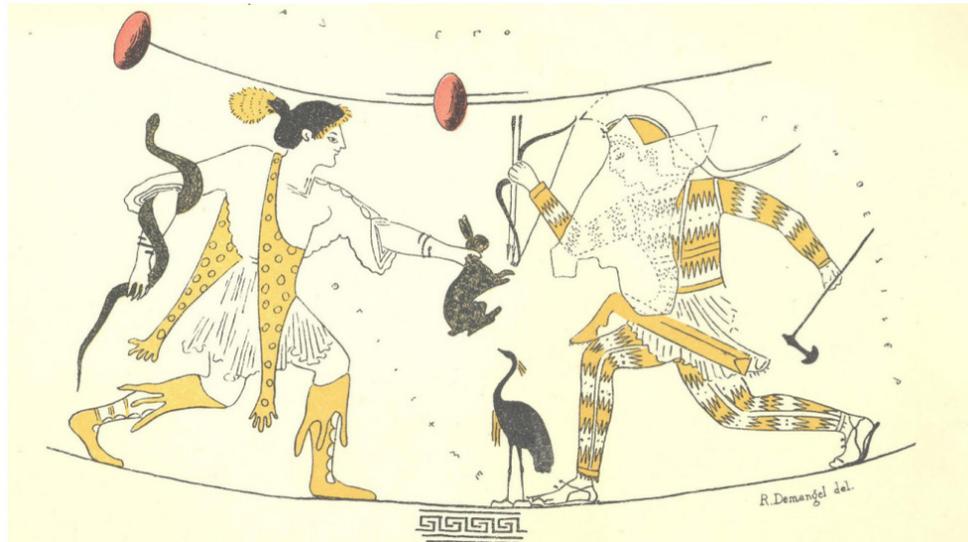
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Vases depicting Achilles slaying Penthesilea

Herakles also has an intimate relationship with an Amazon. For one of his Twelve Labours (challenging tasks which he was set) he had to obtain the 'Belt of Ares' from the Amazon queen Hippolyte. Hippolyte got the belt from her father Ares, and it granted her superpowers. In some versions, Hippolyte admires Herakles as a warrior and potential ally, and she is willing to give up the belt to him. But then, Hera (Herakles' enemy among the gods) comes among the Amazons and riles them up for a fight by whispering that their queen is in danger. Hippolyte is then killed by Herakles (or by the other Amazons) in the confusion:



Perhaps these tales of the heroes' success against the Amazons could stem from an anxiety around the way the Amazons challenged expected gender norms* amongst the Greeks? At the same time, focusing on the idea of the Greek heroes' desire for the Amazon women downplays the idea that the Amazon women would have been very likely to have relationships with other Amazon women. As such, these stories minimise the possibility of women's desire for other women (for a similar treatment of Sappho, see the chapter on Sappho).



In fact, we do have a piece of evidence for ancient Amazons and same-sex relationships. Above is a vase painting that shows a woman hunter (a maenad by the name of Thei-richme) presenting a hare to a warrior in Persian dress, who is identified on the pot as Penthesilea. Such a gift is a common theme in images of male same-sex couples (see an example of this on the next page), so it is probably a sign of courtship here.



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MODERN AMAZONS?

‘Reception studies’ * is an area of Classics which investigates how the Classical world has been ‘received’ or reused since antiquity.

For example, modern writers or artists might retell a story or represent a character from Greek or Roman mythology in a new way. The Amazons have featured in a wealth of art and literature from antiquity to today. These representations focus on what is of interest to their creators, be it their power as women warriors independent of men, their outsider status, or something entirely different.

Dahomey: Amazons of Africa

In a much more modern time period scholars named the actual women warriors that they found around the world after the mythic Amazons with which they were familiar. Many contemporary scholars view that past practice as Eurocentric and colonialist. In the 19th century, scholars coming across the warrior women of the West African Kingdom of Dahomey (located within present-day Benin) called them Amazons. There is a similar story about the state of California. [Click the rainbow below to learn more.](#) Dahomey existed for approximately 300 years, from 1600 until 1900, and is perhaps best known for its army of women called Agojie.

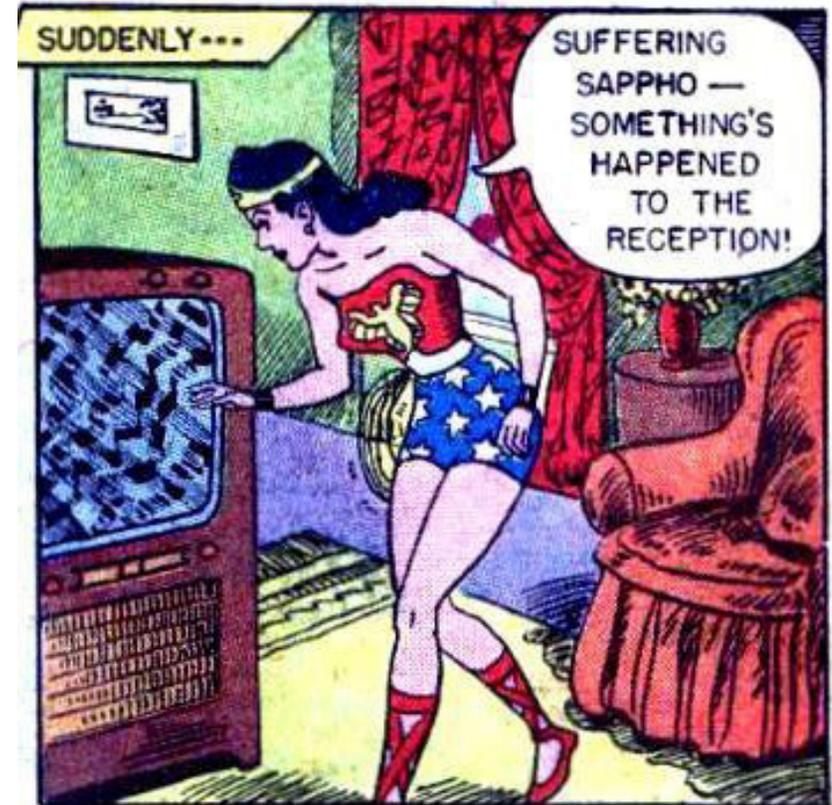
At its peak in the 1840s, the Agojie were an army so fierce that their enemies remarked upon their impressive bravery. This 6,000-strong force surprised their enemies by raiding villages at night, taking captives and returning with resisters' heads as trophies of war. Through their battle skills, these women warriors established Dahomey's dominance in the region. The people of Dahomey were known to European visitors as "Amazons". [Click here to learn a similar story.](#)



Women Warriors in Popular Culture

WONDER WOMAN

The superhero, Wonder Woman, first appeared in a comic book in 1941. Wonder Woman is the daughter of an Amazon – Queen Hippolyta, from the mythical island nation of Themyscira. Her name, Diana, is the Roman version of the Greek goddess of the hunt, Artemis. Like the Amazons, the goddess Artemis/Diana was well known as an excellent hunter and famously rejected the company of men, preferring to spend time with a band of maiden hunters. So by giving Wonder Woman the name Diana, the authors might have expected that readers would think of her as being like an Amazon.

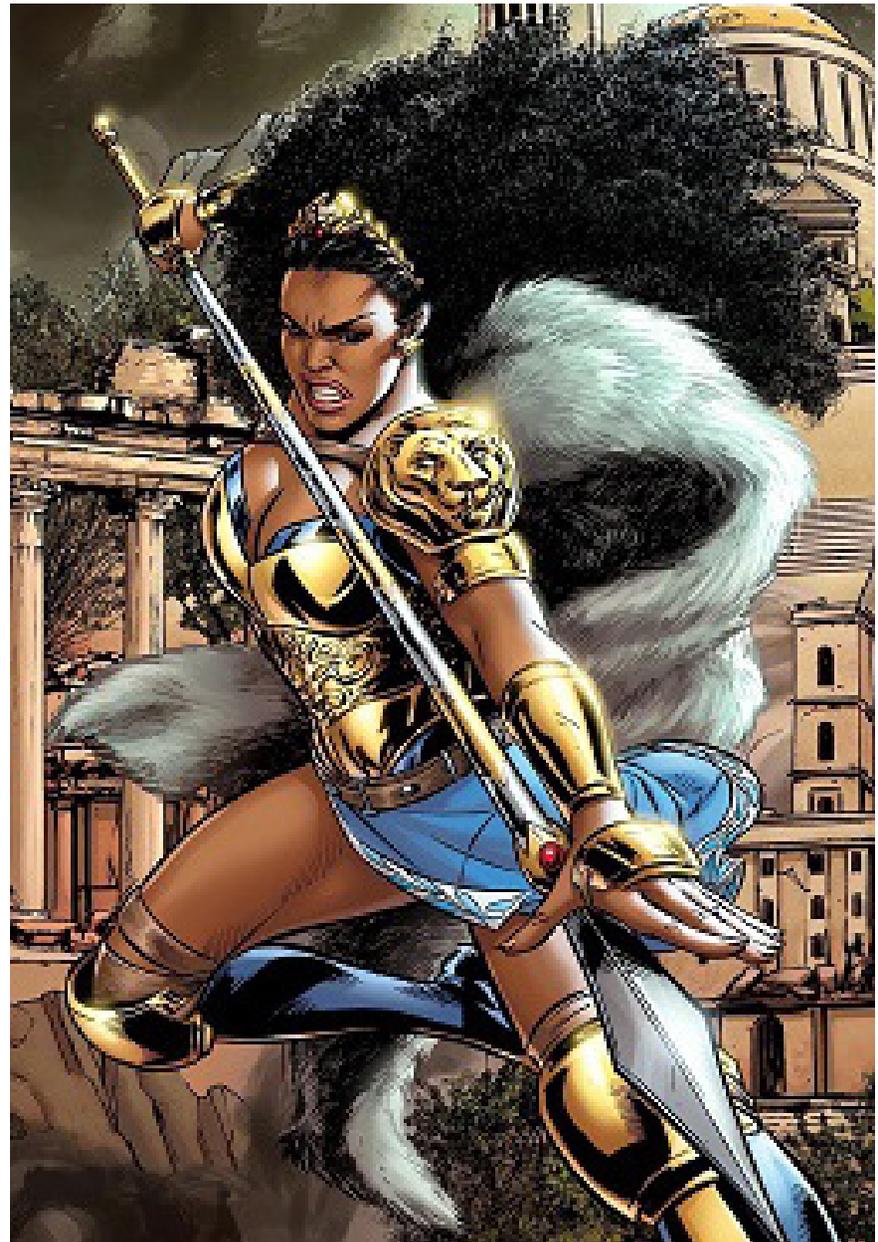




Diana has, for many decades, been one of the most popular comic book characters in America. She has also been featured in TV and movies, most famously the Lynda Carter TV series in the 1970s (to the left) and the two recent movies starring Gal Gadot (to the right). Diana's powers include super strength, speed and agility, high invulnerability, accelerated healing and the ability to communicate with animals. She has a range of amazing equipment, including a lasso that makes anyone tell the truth, indestructible bracelets that can be used as shields, and a tiara that can be thrown as a projectile weapon.



Traditionally the Amazons of Wonder Woman were all white, but more recently the comics and the movies have introduced Black Amazons. One of these, Nubia, pictured here, now has her own comic book.

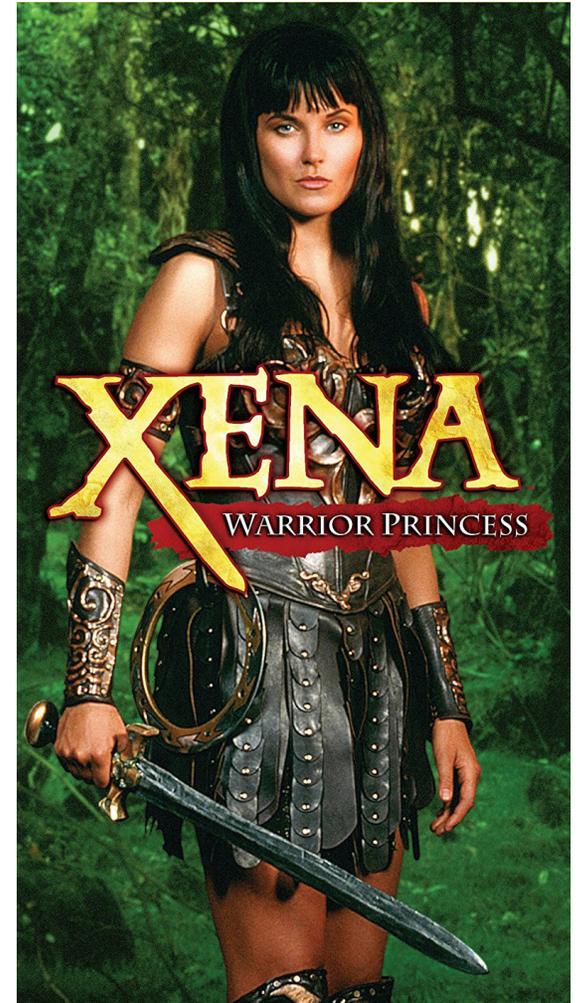


XENA: WARRIOR PRINCESS

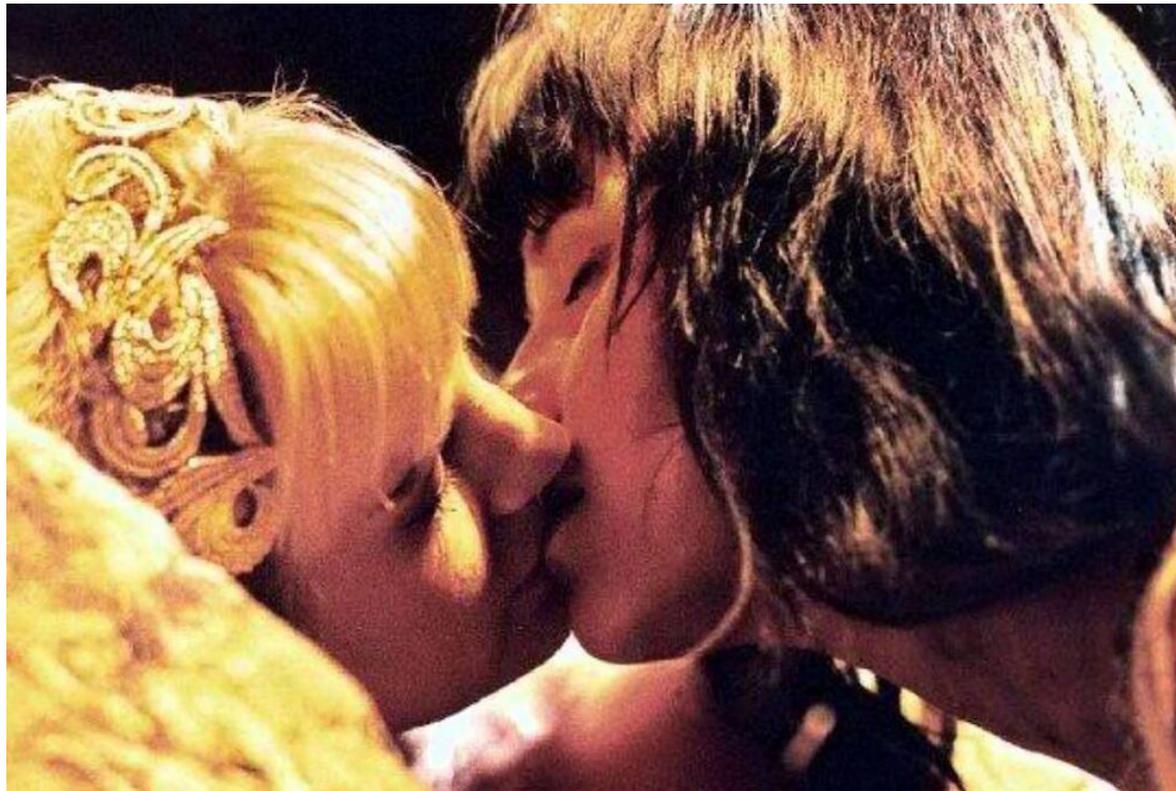
Xena, the main character of the TV series *Xena: Warrior Princess*, (1995-2001) was clearly inspired by myths of the Amazons. She and her sidekick, Gabrielle, travel together through an imaginary ancient world that includes Amazon warriors.

Xena is not actually an Amazon herself, but she knows and honours Amazon traditions and in turn, she is respected and accepted as one of them. Unlike the Amazons in the show, who battle in groups, Xena usually fights alone (with occasional support from Gabrielle).

Gabrielle, on the other hand, actually becomes an Amazon Queen in the episode “Hooves and Harlots” (S1 E10). In this episode, Xena and Gabrielle try to prevent a war between the Centaurs and the Amazons. Gabrielle risks her life to try to save the princess of the tribe. Sadly, she is unsuccessful, but she is named the heir to the princess’ crown in recognition of her bravery.



From the beginning of the series, fans believed that Xena and Gabrielle were more than just friends. The production company took advantage of this, and made sure that their writing included plenty of opportunities for the relationship to be interpreted in this way. As a result, the show was incredibly popular with queer* audiences in the 1990s.



BLACK PANTHER AND THE WOMAN KING

The Agojie (warrior women of Dahomey, discussed above) are a source for the Wakandan warrior women (Dora Milaje) in the film *Black Panther* (2018). Authors and filmmakers have found plenty of potential to tell queer* stories about these women. For example, the film's sequel *Wakanda Forever* (2022) features a heroine as the Black Panther and queer women lovers are in the ranks of the Dora Milaje. Similarly, a special edition of the *Black Panther* comic book called *World of Wakanda* included queer women. The issue doesn't follow the character of the Black Panther, but focuses instead on two female lovers.

In more recent film history, there is also *The Woman King* (2022), a feature length film based on the historic Agojie warriors, whose title uses the masculine "king" to imply gender fluid* or gender non-conforming women.

DONNA DODSON

Modern artist Donna Dodson has been inspired by the Amazons. She says: 'My sculptures present Amazons as historic heroines, seeing them as global players throughout human history. The word itself is often used to denote a woman with physical strength who is in command, a masculine lesbian, or a gender* non-conforming woman. I see myself in these Amazons. The wood-carving that I do requires physical strength, creativity and psychic stamina.'



Amazons Among Us by Donna Dodson

THE AMAZONS IN VIDEO GAMES

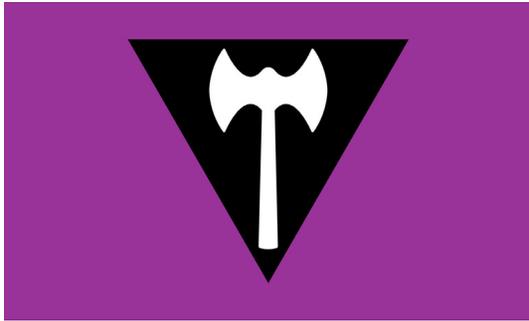
Female warriors and/or female warrior societies are a recurring theme in video games, particularly those that claim to represent ancient history or myth. A recent survey of games set in the ancient world between the 1980s and 2020 showed that female warriors were featured in around a third. The Amazons, specifically, were identified in at least a handful of these.

Assassin's Creed Odyssey features the Daughters of Artemis, a society solely made up of female warriors who have dedicated themselves to the goddess Artemis. Their society lacks any males, and the possibility of same-sex romance is made clear.

Several key quests in *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* involving the Daughters take place on the island of Lesbos, home to the famous ancient Greek poet Sappho, who famously wrote love poetry to women (see chapter on Sappho). The game develops this Lesbian theme by exploring the tragic love story of two Daughters of Artemis, who read Sappho's poetry together. Meanwhile, if the player chooses to play as the female protagonist Cassandra, they are offered the chance to lead the Daughters of Artemis following a brief romance with the leader Daphnae.

A Total War Saga: Troy introduces the Amazons as a playable faction in the Amazons expansion. In Troy, the player can choose to play as either the warrior queen Penthesilea or her sister, Hippolyta.

FEMINIST MOVEMENTS



Unsurprisingly, the idea of the Amazons as an independent, all-female warrior nation who defied the norms of womanhood has captured the imagination of modern feminists and lesbians in particular. A symbol for Lesbian Nation, a lesbian feminist group, is drawn from the ancient double axe associated with Amazons (shown above).

FEMINIST MOVEMENTS

Feminist and trans-activist writer Leslie Feinberg includes the Amazons in their book, *Transgender Warriors*, seeing them as not only a ‘symbol of freedom and resistance for modern feminists,’ but also of ‘transgender resistance’. Clearly the Amazons challenged ancient Greek notions of correct feminine behaviour and could be seen by the Greeks as having transitioned socially. In classical tales of women who lived without men, and were often vilified for doing so, a generation of lesbians saw a mytho-historical precedent for an independent social and political life that had no need for men. [Click here for more.](#)



In their dissertation, Gabrielle Bychowski studies the Amazons in the medieval period, from a trans perspective. [To read this, click here.](#)



CONCLUSION

The myth of the Amazons has proven to be enduringly popular throughout the ages, from ancient Greece to the modern era. Whilst it is difficult to ascertain certain key pieces of information about them (such as their origin, or the nature of their appearance, for example), it is clear that they can tell us a lot about ancient Greek society.

The Amazons challenged traditional gender roles* and unlike Athenian women, they fought like men and sometimes dressed like men. They represented 'otherness'* in relation to the ancient Greeks. They were 'barbarians', thought to come from the outskirts of the 'civilised' world.

As such, they raise important questions about gender* and ethnicity, both in ancient Greece and the present day. Did they represent Greek fears about what might happen if power was given to women, or if 'barbarians' took control? What does this tell us about what life may have been like for Greek women in a patriarchal* society, or for anyone who was not Greek in the Greek world? And finally, how can they inspire us to challenge our own ideas about what it means to be a woman or a foreigner in our own society?

FURTHER RESOURCES

Mayor, Adrienne. *The Amazons: Lives and Legends of Warrior Women Across the Ancient World*

Penrose, Jr., Walter D. *Postcolonial Amazons: Female Masculinity and Courage in Ancient Greek and Sanskrit Literature*

Alpern, Stanley Bernard. *Amazons of Black Sparta: The Women Warriors of Dahomey*

Blok, Josine. *The Early Amazons: Modern and Ancient Perspectives on a Persistent Myth*

Tyrrell, William Blake. 1984. *Amazons, a Study in Athenian Mythmaking*.

DuBois, Page. 1982. *Centaur and Amazons: Women and the Pre-history of the Great Chain of Being*.

Bychowski, M.W. 2016. "The Island of the Amazons: The Medieval Place of Transgender." Transliteration: Things Transform. <http://www.thingstransform.com/2016/04/the-island-of-amazons-medieval-place-of.html>. Retrieved July 7, 2021.

GLOSSARY

City-state: Ancient Greece was not a 'country' like modern Greece is today. Instead, it consisted of a number of different cities which had their own laws and political systems, amongst other things. To reflect this idea of each city operating independently, we use the word 'city-state' to refer to places such as Athens or Sparta.

Gender: this term describes the behaviors, emotions, and other characteristics typically ascribed to men and women.

Gender fluid: this is an identity in which a person does not have one single gender; rather, their gender identity and expression can change from day to day.

Gender role: this is a phrase which is used to describe the expectations placed upon an individual by society to behave in a certain way, due to their gender. NB, the individual may not always agree with these expectations.

Otherness: a synonym for this term might be 'perceived difference'. When discussing the ancient Greeks, it is used in relation to the way in which they 'othered' certain groups of historical or mythical people (like Amazons or 'barbarians'). In other words, they emphasised alleged differences between these other groups and the Greeks themselves.

Matriarchy: a matriarchy is a society in which women hold the primary positions of power.

Patriarchy: similar to the term 'matriarchy', a patriarchy is a society in which men hold the primary positions of power.

Queer: an identity in which a person identifies as a sexuality or gender identity outside of heterosexuality or the gender binary.

Stereotype: a stereotype is a belief about a certain category of people which is generalised, i.e. not based on evidence of individuals. It may be derogatory in nature. For example, in Greek literature, there is sometimes a stereotype about Persians being oppressive and cruel.

Xenophobia: this is the dislike of foreigners. The Greeks were often xenophobic of anyone who did not come from Greece. Although it has certain things in common with the modern idea of racism, it is not quite the same, as the Greeks were more concerned with the idea of Greek vs. non-Greek than skin colour.

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Image Credits

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APPENDIX

How Did the Amazons Survive as a Woman-Only Society?

Clearly, such a society would soon die out unless they had some means of reproducing themselves. Hellanicus, a 4th-century BCE author, suggests that the Amazons did so by having sex with the men of neighbouring tribes, and then raising female infants while killing their male offspring. Another writer, Strabo, has a less brutal version. He claims that the Amazons had an arrangement with the men of the Gargarians where they would meet once a year to reproduce. The Amazons then raised only their daughters and gave any male offspring to the Gargarians. A similar story is told of Alexander the Great. While his army was camped in Hyrcania near the Caspian Sea, it was approached by an Amazon army led by Queen Thalestris. She explained to Alexander that she wished to have a child with him, because surely any child of theirs would be the mightiest warrior in the world. As we have seen in other Amazon stories, Thalestris promised to return the child to Alexander should it be born male.

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Diodorus Siculus: 'After these events there came in Scythia a period of revolutions, in which the rulers were women endowed with exceptional valour. For among these peoples the women train for war just as do the men and in acts of manly valour are in no way inferior to the men. Therefore distinguished women have been the doers of many great deeds, not in Scythia alone, but also in the territory bordering it. For instance, when Cyrus the king of the Persians, the mightiest ruler of his day, made a campaign with a vast army into Scythia, the queen of the Scythians not only cut the army of the Persians to pieces but she even took Cyrus prisoner and crucified him...'

Notice how this text describes the Amazons' military skill as 'manly' – this reveals the Greek attitude that fighting in war should be reserved for men.

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Where Were the Amazons From?

Libya - The historian Diodorus Siculus tells the story of an Amazon queen named Myrina, who led an army of 30,000 foot soldiers and 3,000 cavalry (54.2). Diodorus Siculus mentions how the size of their cavalry was unusual, and also comments on their unusual armour (made of the skin of giant snakes) and how they fought with lances and used bow and arrows on the battlefield. All of these features were different from the way Greeks fought: in armour made from bronze, using long spears and round shields.

Scythia - As we saw earlier, Diodorus Siculus places them in Scythia (2.45.2-3). The poet Bacchylides (Odes 8) mentions the Amazons as living beside the river Thermodon, which would put their homeland in Asia Minor (modern Turkey) rather than Scythia. He refers to them as skilled spear women, and as the daughters of Ares, the war god. Both of these details certainly stress their ability as warriors.

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Where Were the Amazons From?

Sauromatia - The historian Herodotus (4.110-117) tells the story of how the people of Sauromatia came from a union between Amazons and Scythians. In this version, some Amazons had been captured by Greeks and were being transported via ship, when the captive Amazons turned on their captors and killed them. But the Amazons did not know how to sail ships, and so floated aimlessly until they landed in Scythia. Here they found wild horses, and since they had always used horses for warfare, they started raiding the nearby towns. This is how they came into contact with the Scythians. Some Scythian men decided that they wanted to have children with the Amazons and, even though they did not share a language, they communicated that they meant the Amazons no harm. Over time, the Amazons learned the language of the Scythians, and they were able to discuss what the Scythians wanted. The Scythians wanted the Amazons to come back with them and to live as their wives. The Amazons refused this offer, saying that they could never go to live with the Scythians, because their women have completely different customs. The Amazons wanted to continue to live as they always had done - to hunt and ride horses, but the Scythians wanted wives who would stay at home and weave and look after children. So they compromised - they decided that the Amazons and the Scythians would move a three-day journey to the East and set-up a new settlement. From this point on, they were known as the Sauromatae, and the Amazons continued to ride and to hunt, and sometimes to marry men.

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Where Were the Amazons From?

Colchis - The geographer Strabo states that the Amazons came from the foothills of the Caucasus Mountains (9.5.1). He mentions that the Amazons would ride horses and hunt, as well as ploughing and planting fields and rearing cattle. He mentions also that the Amazons had two special months in the springtime when they would travel into the neighbouring mountain, which separated them from their nearest neighbours, in order to procreate with men from the neighbouring community. The Caucasus Mountains are also the location of ancient Colchis, a rich place thought to be at the “ends of the world”, and the homeland of the famous witch, Medea. In the story of Jason and the Argonauts, the Greek hero Jason went on a quest to Colchis to retrieve a magical item called the Golden Fleece. He managed this, but only with the help of Medea, who used magic and cunning to help him defeat a dragon, an army of skeletons, a bronze giant and to escape her father Aieetes (the king of Colchis). Later in the story, Jason leaves Medea for a Greek princess, and Medea gets gruesome revenge on him. Stories about Medea always emphasise that she was a barbarian. Perhaps by putting the Amazon homeland in ancient Colchis, Strabo is suggesting that the Amazons were like Medea - clever, powerful, and dangerous to men.

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Where Were the Amazons From?

Themiscyra - Pausanias, the geographer, mentions the city of Themiscyra as being the home of the Amazons when the Greek hero Herakles was attacking it, alongside his comrade Theseus (1.2.1). In this story, the mighty Herakles is unable to take the Amazon city, implying that the defence the Amazons were able to put up was impressive indeed! Still, he was eventually successful, because the Amazon Antiope fell in love with Theseus, and offered the city to him willingly. Strabo, the geographer, also mentions that the Amazons founded the city of Ephesus in the region of Themiscyra (9.5.4). In agreement with these versions, the poet Callimachus wrote a Hymn to the goddess Artemis, which describes how the famous Temple of Artemis at Ephesus (one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World) was set-up by the Amazons here.

Thrace - The Aethiopis is an epic poem that told part of the story of the Trojan War. Today, only small fragments of it survive, but one fragment of the poem talks about the Amazon queen Penthesilea, and states that she was Thracian born. The Trojan War was a conflict where men from all over Greece came together to wage war against the city of Troy, after the Spartan queen Helen had been taken by the Trojan prince Paris. Stories of the Trojan War tend to depict the Trojans as like Greeks, but not actually Greek. For example, they worship the same gods as the Greeks, but their lifestyles were luxurious, unlike the Greeks who prided themselves on living humbly. The Amazon Penthesilea fought on the side of Troy, so this already makes her seem foreign and non-Greek. Add to this that she came to Troy from even further away, then she starts to seem very barbarian indeed.

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Did the Amazons really exist?

This is a difficult question, partly because the Greeks didn't have the same distinction between "fiction" and "history" as we do now. The Amazons are mixed in with real historical events, but they also appear in stories which are obviously not real, like their fight with the god Dionysos.

One common way of thinking about Greek myth is to imagine a central truth around which a story might be built. A good example of this is the story of the Cyclops, a monster with one eye. It's possible this might have been inspired by seeing the skull of an elephant, which has one large, central hole for the trunk which could look like an eye socket.

This works well for the Amazon story because there were real-life women warriors living near ancient Greece. The Scythians and Saurmatians were groups of nomadic tribes who lived to the north of the Black Sea, an area which is now mostly Ukraine and Southern Russia. Excavations of tombs from this region have uncovered female skeletons with evidence of riding horses and shooting bows, and even some injuries that suggest they died in battle.

This also fits with several of our historical sources. Diodorus tells us that Scythian women trained "for warfare like the men." Herodotus describes how some Sauromatian women "ride out hunting, with their men or without them; they go to war and wear the same dress as the men". Herodotus even goes as far as to say that these Sauromatians are the descendants of the Amazons. So it's possible that the stories of the Amazons were based upon Scythian and Sauromatian women, whom we know were a historical reality.

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California

The US state of California gets its name from a story from the 1500's about an island west of the Indies inhabited by black Amazon-like women who rode man-eating griffins. Their armour was made of gold, as gold was plentiful in their land. As Spanish conquerors explored the Americas, they tried to find the island of California, because they wanted the gold. California was probably named by an explorer named Hernan Cortez. When he reached the tip of what is today called Baja California in Mexico, he thought it was an island, and he decided that it was the California from the stories! The name stuck.

Similarly, when the explorer Pedro de Magalhaes de Gandavo encountered a group of female warriors in Northeastern Brazil, he gave the river there the name "River of the Amazons" (Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors*, Boston 1996, p. 58).

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Many of these feminist groups rejected cultural and linguistic trappings of the patriarchy, including the 'stale, pale, and male' associations of classical antiquity and the so-called Western Canon. Running counter to this trend, these groups actively embraced and reclaimed the language and imagery of women who were vilified by classical authors. Amazons featured prominently (along with Furies and Gorgons), and the 1970s saw the creation of journals like *Amazon Quarterly* and *Amazon: A Midwest Journal for Women*, as well as the *Dyke Separatist/Amazon Magick* publication, which billed itself as being "by, about, for Amazons." All of these journals catered to an exclusively female and predominantly lesbian readership. Meanwhile, groups with names like *Ambitious Amazons*, *Amazon Nation*, and *The Amazon Collective* were popping up as publishers and political organizers. While many of these groups were centered there, this phenomenon was by no means limited to the United States, as Montreal's *Amazones d'Hier, lesbiennes d'Aujourd'hui* (Amazons of Yesterday, Lesbians of Today), Chile's *Amazonas*, and *Amazon Acres* (in New South Wales, Australia) attest.

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