

The Amazons - Teachers' Guide

The resources about the Amazons have been designed in order to help teachers to have discussions on this rich and interesting topic with their students. We understand that the situation may vary from school to school as regards what opportunities there are to do so, namely in terms of the year group in question and whether this fits within the existing curriculum or is something which could be included as part of an extra-curricular activity (for example, a lunchtime club).

The chapter itself may be used as background on some key themes relating to the Amazons: their origin, their challenging of the accepted gender 'norms' in ancient Greece, their 'otherness', their appearance and the modern reception of the Amazons in popular culture. It is anticipated that teachers may use sections of the chapter depending on what is most appropriate and engaging for the level of their students. The teaching activities below have been designed to offer a variety of ideas from which to choose, depending on the specific aims of teachers and the year groups with which they are working.

1. Starter Activity: Word Association Game

Activity aim: to highlight accepted gender norms in ancient Greece

Suggested age group: this could work with any age group. Those with less knowledge of the Classical world may need more prompting.

Timing: 20 minutes (5 minutes on men, 5 on women, 10 minutes discussion time)

Depending on class size, either divide into groups and give students flipchart paper, or run as a relay race in two groups, with students taking turns to add their word to the board. Set a timer for five minutes and ask students to write as many words they can relating to the phrase 'ancient Greek men' within the time limit. They should not think too hard about it but write the first thing that comes to mind. Then repeat for the phrase 'ancient Greek women'.

Following this, have a class discussion. Pick out key themes relating to ancient Greek gender roles, to highlight the difference between the lifestyles of ancient Greek men and women. For students with less knowledge of the Classical world, prompts could be used in the initial brief such as the names of historical or mythical figures they may

have encountered. As a stretch activity, students could categorise the words they have come up with into historical facts vs. stereotypes. For example, women weaving may be a historical fact, whereas women being overly emotional would be a stereotype. Keep this information to hand when moving onto an activity which introduces the idea of the Amazons transgressing traditional gender roles.

2. Exploring Gender Roles in Funerary Art

Activity Aim: to highlight the portrayal of accepted gender roles in ancient Greece

Suggested age group: 13-14 (or if working with younger years, you could pick one of the images and have a whole class discussion on it)

Timing: 5 minutes for reading. 5 minutes for students to analyse their image in groups. 15 minutes for class discussion.

Ask students to read 'Greek women in Greek society' section of the Amazons chapter as background. Divide students into groups and give them a printout of a gravestone to analyse along with the discussion questions for each gravestone, to help guide their analysis. Following this, display all four gravestones to the class and each group reports back on their findings. Use the overall discussion questions below to highlight key differences in the portrayal of gender roles in ancient Greece.

NB, more information on each gravestone can be found by clicking on the links below.

Gravestone 1: Grave relief of Ampharete with her grandchild (Athens)

[File:Athens - Kerameikos - sculpture 03.jpg - Wikimedia Commons](#)



- What do you think is the relationship between the two people depicted on this gravestone, and why do you think that?
- What is the woman on the left doing?
- How are the woman and the baby dressed?
- Whose gravestone do you think this was, and why?
- What impression of the woman do you get when looking at this gravestone? Pick three adjectives to describe her.

Gravestone 2: Grave stele of Neike (Athens)

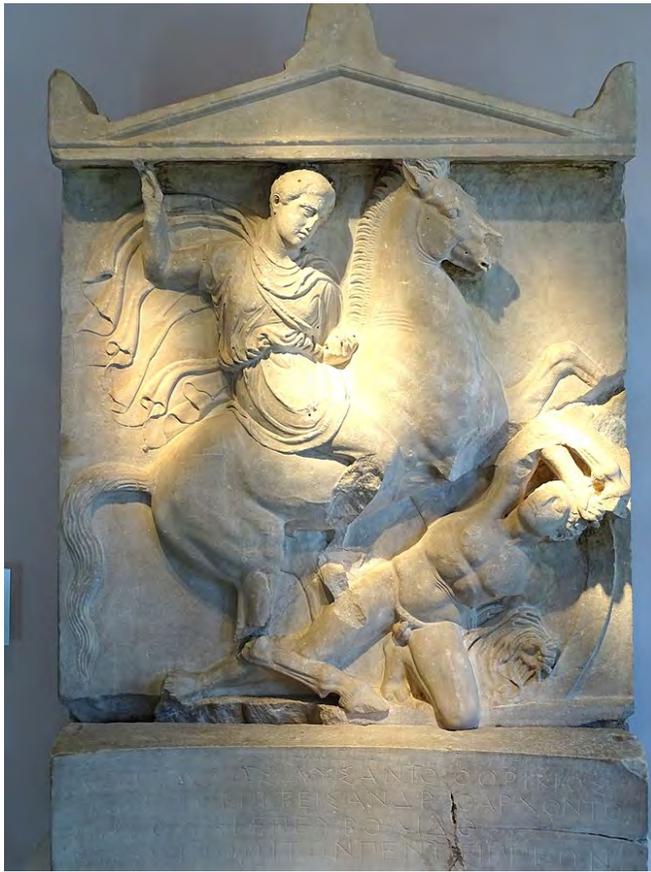
[File:Grave stele of Neike from Athens. A.D. 160-180.jpg - Wikimedia Commons](#)



- How are these women dressed?
- Who do you think they might be?
- What do you think might be the relationship between them and why do you think that?
- Looking at their body language, i.e. the way they are standing and holding themselves, what do you think they might be thinking or feeling and why?

Gravestone 3: Grave stele of Dexileos (Athens)

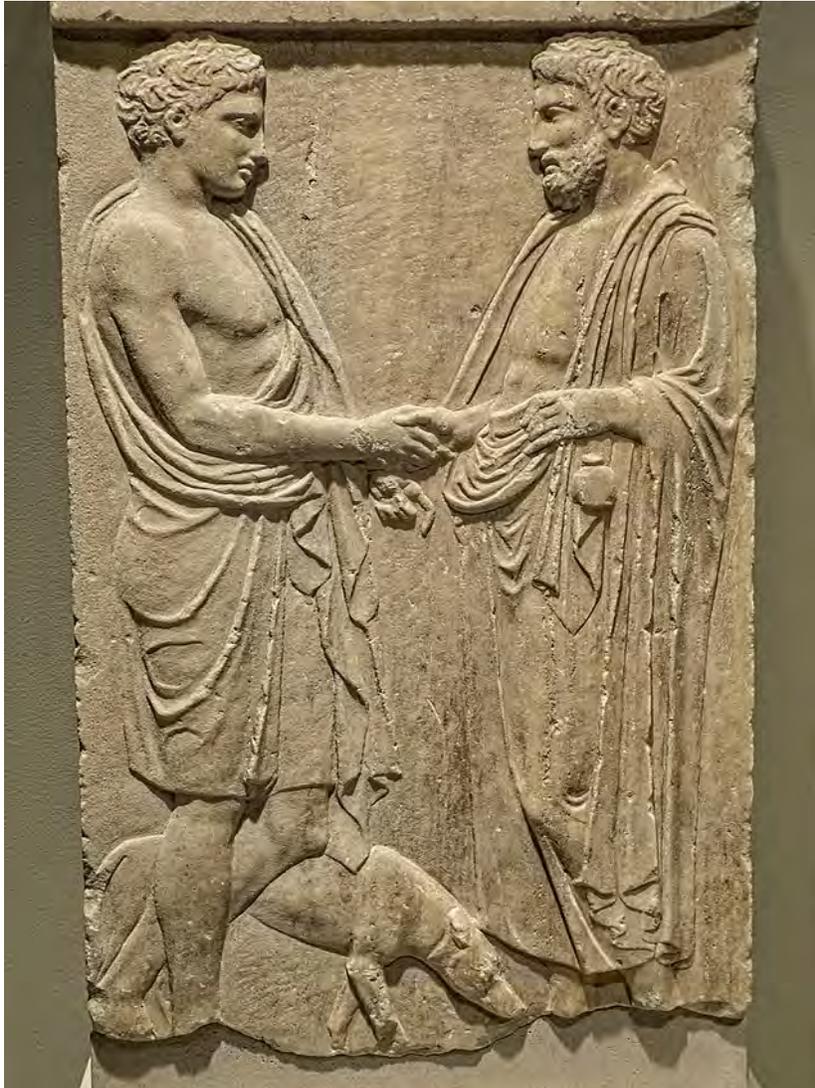
[File:Athens Kerameikos Grave Stele of Dexileos.jpg - Wikimedia Commons](#)



- Do you think this is the gravestone of the man on the left or on the right? Why do you think that?
- What do you think they are doing?
- Pick three adjectives to describe the person on the horse. What qualities has the person who made this gravestone chosen to emphasise? Why do you think they have done that?

Gravestone 4: Grave stele (Athens)

[File:Grave stele depicting a young man shaking his father's hand with his dog Greek 400 BCE Pentelic Marble NAM Athens.jpg - Wikimedia Commons](#)



- What age would you say each of the men are in this image, and why?
- What do you think is the relationship between them?
- How are they dressed?
- Pick three adjectives to describe them.

Group discussion questions:

- What qualities of the people depicted are emphasised on each gravestone, and why do you think that might be?
- What differences can you spot between the portrayal of men and women on these gravestones?
- How do these gravestones reinforce what you have learned about Greek gender roles?
- Stretch questions:
- How might the fact that these are gravestones influence their value as historical pieces of evidence?
- Who do you think might have ordered these gravestones, and how might that influence how we interpret them?

3. Creative Writing: A Day in the Life

Activity aim: to encourage students to imagine a day in the life of an Athenian woman or an Amazon

Suggested age group: 11-13

Timing: 15 minutes reading time, 30 minutes writing time (perhaps as a homework task), optional 15 minutes peer feedback time

Ask students to read 'Greek women in Greek society' and 'The Amazons' defiance of accepted norms' sections of the Amazons chapter. Brief students to write either a) a diary entry or b) a letter to a friend, from the point of view of either an Athenian woman or an Amazon.

In a future lesson, the work can be swapped with a partner and peer-marked. Suggested marking criteria below - this can be refined by teachers depending on the skills they would like to develop with students, or if time allows, students themselves can come up with more specific marking criteria - e.g. what do they think makes an effective piece of creative writing?:

- 5 marks for accurate references to historical facts and/or elements of the Amazons myths
- 5 marks for creativity

This activity could also generate some good work for a classroom display.

4. News Report: the Amazons attack Athens

Activity aim: to increase students' familiarity with a key Amazon myth, and explore the characterisation of both the Greeks and the Amazons in this story

Suggested age group: 11-14 (younger years may be more suited to the script-writing and acting option, whilst older years to writing a newspaper article)

Timing: if writing a script and rehearsing, this may take around 1 hour of preparation time in groups, and 30 minutes of performing to the class depending on class size. If a written newspaper report, 1 hour of homework

Ask students to read the 'Greeks vs. Amazons' section of the chapter.

Option A: divide the class into groups. Each group to devise a script for a 5-minute televised news report on the story of the Amazons' attack on Athens. The news report should include at least ten references to the myth, and could include interviews with key characters and/or eye-witnesses. It should seek to explore the reasons behind the Amazons' attack, as well as Athenian perspectives on events. It is also worth stipulating that, just like a real news report, students should not directly depict any violence in their report (but can comment on it having occurred). As an extra prompt, before they start writing, students can think of three adjectives which best describe each of the characters they will be including in their report. In a future lesson, students can perform their piece to the class and the class can feed back according to criteria decided by the teacher e.g. accuracy to the myth, characterisation, creativity etc.

Option B: instead of writing a news report script, older students may prefer to write a newspaper article. This can include quotes from key characters and eye-witnesses as well as images from Greek art.

5. Written Source Analysis

Activity aim: to explore the characterisation of the Amazons in a written source

Suggested age group: 13+

Timing: This depends on the age and level of the group. If reading the passage in translation, 15 minutes to analyse and annotate it, 10 minutes class discussion time. In case you are teaching older students who can read Latin, the original Latin text has also been provided. This could be translated as a separate activity first, or provided alongside the English translation so that students can pick out some of the Latin words in their analysis. It would be helpful if the students have read the Amazons chapter (minus the reception section) first, but equally, key points from that could be summarised before the students do this activity.

The extract below is from Virgil's *Aeneid*, the epic Roman poem which describes the adventures of the mythical Trojan hero Aeneas after he escapes from the Trojan war to Italy, in order to complete his fated mission to establish the Roman race. Upon arriving in Italy, Aeneas must fight a war with the local people before he can establish the Trojan people there. Camilla, of the local Volscian tribe, is a fierce warrior woman and fights on the opposing side. Although not specifically an Amazon, Virgil calls her one, perhaps to stress these warlike characteristics. Read the passage below, and answer the questions which follow.

But an Amazon exulted in the midst of the slaughter,
with one breast bared for battle: Camilla, armed with her quiver:
now she showered sturdy javelins, scattering them from her hands,
now she lifted a strong battle-axe in her unwearied grasp:
and Diana's weapon, a golden bow, rattled on her shoulder.
Even when she retreated, attacked from behind,
she reversed her bow and fired arrows while fleeing.
And around her were chosen comrades, virgin Larina,
and Tulla, and Tarpeia wielding her axe of bronze,
the Italides, daughters of Italy, whom noble Camilla
chose herself as her glory, faithful servants in peace or war:
such were the Amazons of Thrace, treading Thermodon's
streams, and fighting with ornate weapons, around
Hippolyte, or when Penthesilea returned, in her chariot,
and the ranks of women with crescent shields exulted.
Whom did you strike, first and last, with your spear, fierce girl?
How many bodies did you spill over the earth?

at medias inter caedes exultat Amazon,
unum exserta latus pugnae, pharetrata Camilla, 650
et nunc lenta manu spargens hastilia denset,

nunc validam dextra rapit indefessa bipennem;
aureus ex umero sonat arcus et arma Dianae.
illa etiam in tergum, siquando pulsa recessit,
spicula converso fugientia dirigit arcu. 655
at circum lectae comites, Larinaque virgo
Tullaque et aeratam quatiens Tarpeia securem,
Italides, quas ipsa decus sibi dia Camilla
delegit pacisque bonas bellique ministras:
quales Threiciae cum flumina Thermodontis 660
pulsant et pictis bellantur Amazones armis
seu circum Hippolyten, seu cum se Martia curru
Penthesilea refert, magnoque ululante tumultu
feminea exsultant lunatis agmina peltis.
quem telo primum, quem postremum, aspera virgo, 665
deicis? aut quot humi morientia corpora fundis?

[Virgil, *Aeneid*, 11.649-666]

English translation by A.S. Kline: [Virgil \(70 BC–19 BC\) - Aeneid: XI](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/Virgil/Virgil%20BC-19%20BC-Aeneid%20XI)
([poetryintranslation.com](http://www.poetryintranslation.com))

Discussion questions:

- What weapons does Camilla have in this passage?
- What does this passage tell us about how Camilla fought in battle?
- What does it tell us about Camilla's leadership skills?
- Explain the references to Diana, Hippolyte and Penthesilea.
- How does Virgil make this passage exciting?

6. Visual Source Analysis

Activity aim: to explore and compare the characterisation of Achilles and Penthesilea in two different visual sources

Suggested age group: 13-18

Timing: 5 minutes reading, 10 minutes to analyse the vase paintings, 10 minutes class discussion time.

Ask students to read the 'Greeks vs. Amazons' section of the chapter. Give students a printout of the following two vase paintings which depict Achilles and Penthesilea. Ask students to consider the discussion points below, and then discuss as a class.

The battle of Achilles and Penthesilea. Lucanian red-figure bell-krater, in the National Archaeological Museum of Spain

[File: Bell-krater Akhilleus Penthesileia MAN.jpg - Wikimedia Commons](#)



Attic red figure kylix depicting Achilles and Penthesilea, the Penthesilea Painter, in Staatliche Antikensammlungen, Munich

[File:Akhilleus Penthesileia Staatliche Antikensammlungen 2688.jpg - Wikimedia Commons](#)



Discussion questions:

- How is Achilles portrayed on these vases? For example, is there anything about the way he is standing which tells us more about this moment?
- How is Penthesilea portrayed? For example, how is she positioned in comparison to Achilles, and what do you think this might tell us?
- What differences can you spot between the way they are portrayed on each of these vases?
- How are they each dressed, and what is the effect of this on our impression of them?

- If there are others on the vase, who do you think they are, and why do you think they have been included?
- (Stretch question): why do you think the Greeks may have wanted to see pictures of this story on their vases?

Further exploration:

There is a wealth of Greek art depicting Greeks and Amazons. If there is time for further exploration, students could investigate the frieze from the Temple of Apollo at Bassae depicting the Amazons fighting the Greeks, which is an extended piece showing a variety of different Greeks and Amazons in combat. Detailed images and descriptions are available on the British Museum website, for example: [frieze | British Museum](#).

They could also look at the Euphronios krater, which depicts Herakles fighting the Amazons here: [Euphronios ARV 15 6 komos - Herakles and the Amazons \(03\) - Category:Euphronios krater \(Arezzo\) - Wikimedia Commons](#). They could compare the way that Herakles is portrayed with how Achilles is portrayed above, as well as look at the Amazons' clothing (some are depicted with attributes of Greek male warriors, some with patterned clothing like 'barbarians').

7. Discussion Group

Activity aim: to highlight key themes relating to the Amazons and encourage students to read academic writing and articulate their ideas

Suggested age group: 16-18

Timing: timings are flexible depending on how many sources you ask the students to read and how much discussion time is available. Perhaps 1+ hour reading, and 30 minutes to 1 hour discussion time.

This activity would suit slightly older students, perhaps as part of an extra-curricular society or as a session designed to help those students aiming to pursue a Classics degree at university/college.

Suggested reading:

- Antigone Rising: The Subversive Power of the Ancient Myths, Helen Morales: Chapter One, Killing Amazons (advisable to read this in advance as it contains some sensitive material)
- Pandora's Jar: Women in the Greek Myths, Natalie Haynes: Chapter Five, The Amazons

- Ancient Amazons - Heroes, Outsiders or Women?, Lorna Hardwick, Greece & Rome , Apr., 1990, Vol. 37, No. 1 (Apr., 1990), pp. 14-36

Discussion questions:

- What links does Morales make between the misogyny in the Amazon stories and misogyny in the present day?
- In what ways were Amazons 'bad women'? (see page 6)
- How does Morales believe that looking to the ancient myths of the Amazons might help us in dealing with misogyny today? (See page 14)
- Haynes writes that the Amazons 'exist in a space between masculine and feminine, between civilisation and wildness, between real and fantastical' (page 115). Explain what she means by this?
- Read Haynes' account of the story of Hercules and Hippolyta. How is each figure characterised? Does anything surprise you about this myth?
- Read Haynes' account of the story of Penthesilea. What similarities can you see between her and a Greek male hero such as Achilles?
- What elements of the Amazon myths do the modern stories of Wonder Woman and Buffy the Vampire Slayer pick up on, according to Haynes? In what ways are these new iterations of Amazons different to the ancient Amazons?
- Read the Hardwick article. In what ways do Amazons challenge traditional beliefs about Greek male heroes or Greek women, and in what ways are they 'outsiders'?

8. Exploring the modern reception of Amazons

Activity aim: to highlight the lasting legacy of the mythical Amazons and their continuing relevance today

Suggested age group: 14-18

Timing: depending on the age group, perhaps 1-2 hours of preparation time plus 5 minutes per student or group to present to the class

Students to read the section on the modern reception of the Amazons from the chapter. Working either individually or in groups, students to prepare a five minute presentation on one example of the Amazons in contemporary or popular culture. This should include:

- Basic information about the creator/artist: who were they, when did they live etc.

- Summary of the content of the e.g. television programme / body of art
- Explanation of how this work was inspired by the Amazons; what elements of the myths does it take up or build upon?
- Which elements of the stories of the ancient Amazons are being emphasised in these works, and why do the students think that is the case?
- (Stretch question): what has been added onto the ancient Amazon myths in order to help these stories work in the modern world?

Teaching potentially difficult material

While it is hoped that many discussions inspired by these materials will be positive and affirming for students, some elements may raise uncomfortable thoughts and feelings. For example, discussion and deconstruction of stereotypical masculinity or femininity may feel helpful for some students struggling with their own gender identity, but for others it may be deeply unsettling. Some of the narratives being explored also contain mention of violence, including sexual violence.

None of this is a reason to avoid this material or conversations pertaining to it, quite the opposite in fact. These conversations can be valuable, instructive and catalysts for important change. They should always, however, be undertaken carefully and thoughtfully. As an educator, remember that your students cannot leave their lives and traumas at the door (and neither can you). Such work requires you to be alert, engaged and sometimes vulnerable. Check in with yourself: can you do this today? If you do not feel in a good place to do so, then honour that. If you 'don't have time to unpack this' then do not bring these things into the room until you do. Give such topics the space they need.

There is no 'correct' way to teach sensitive material - it is context dependent, but the following principles may provide a sensible framework:

Safe environment. This is the most important factor for teaching difficult material successfully. This may include a clear class code of conduct which emphasises the need to respect the views of others, as well as a clear way for students to indicate to the teacher that they are uncomfortable or in need of support.

Never aim to shock. Upsetting or sensitive material should never be presented with the aim of shocking or surprising students. This is important for all learners but especially for those who have suffered past trauma. Keep the 'temperature' in the room down and try to present things calmly. This does not mean glossing over or eliding violence, but instead thinking about how to present it in a way that does not increase the emotional

load placed on students. This also applies to content warnings which should be given in a calm, neutral manner rather than as a dramatic announcement. Warnings might be incorporated into aims of a lesson and should convey the nature of the material to be studied but not assume any specific emotional reaction. For example, "in this session we will examine the story of Antiope, who was abducted by the hero Theseus, and discuss what ideas about violence against women are reflected by this and other myths we have studied", rather than, "in this session we will examine the disturbing story of Antiope, who was abducted by the hero Theseus, and discuss what ideas about violence against women are reflected by this and other myths we have studied. I recognise some of you may find this topic upsetting and want you to be prepared."

Individualised approach. Different students will be able to engage with traumatic or sensitive material to different degrees and will prefer to do so in different ways. Avoid activities which put students on the 'spot', for example rather than targeting specific students with questions, instead ask questions to the whole room and allow students to volunteer answers. When students do offer their thoughts, allow sufficient time for them to be expressed and fully discussed. Activities such as free writing can be very useful, as can allowing a range of ways in which students can express their thoughts (for example accepting oral responses or drawings rather than only written work).

Create distance. Do not force students to imagine the mindset of a victim of violence or oppressed person. For example, avoid questions such as "What do you think Penthesilea might be feeling when she comes face to face with Achilles?" and perhaps instead ask "What does the depiction of Achilles and Penthesilea on this vase tell us about what the Greeks thought about these two characters?". The former asks students to imagine being in Penthesilea's situation, whereas the latter looks for a factual, yet still important, answer. Emotional insights might be offered by students, but they should not be directly sought or forced. Allowing students to maintain emotional distance should they need to make for safer exploration of these topics.

Further Reading/Listening Ideas

Here are some suggested reading / listening ideas for older students who wish to explore the topic further:

Haynes, Natalie (2020), Pandora's Jar: Women in the Greek Myths - Chapter Five, The Amazons

[BBC Radio 4 - Natalie Haynes Stands Up for the Classics, Series 6, Penthesilea, Amazon Warrior Queen](#)

Hardwick, Lorna (1990), Ancient Amazons - Heroes, Outsiders or Women?, Greece & Rome , Apr., 1990, Vol. 37, No. 1 (Apr., 1990), pp. 14-36

Man, John (2017), Amazons: The Real Warrior Women of the Ancient World

Mayor, Adrienne (2016), The Amazons: Lives and Legends of Warrior Women across the Ancient World

[The Real Amazons: Separating Fact from Fiction \(nationalgeographic.com\)](#)

Morales, Helen (2020), Antigone Rising: The Subversive Power of the Ancient Myths, Chapter One, Killing Amazons

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. Centaurs 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." Transliterature: Things Transform.

<http://www.thingstransform.com/2016/04/the-island-of-amazons-medieval-place-of.html>
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