

# Diodorus Siculus on the Amazons

## Amazons in Africa

But now that we have examined these matters it will be fitting, in connection with the regions we have mentioned, to discuss the account which history records of the Amazons who were in Libya in ancient times. For the majority of mankind believe that <sup>p247</sup> the only Amazons were those who are reported to have dwelt in the neighbourhood of the Thermodon river on the Pontus;<sup>6</sup> but the truth is otherwise, since the Amazons of Libya were much earlier in point of time and accomplished notable deeds. <sup>2</sup> Now we are not unaware that to many who read this account the history of this people will appear to be a thing unheard of and entirely strange; for since the race of these Amazons disappeared entirely many generations before the Trojan War, whereas the women about the Thermodon river were in their full vigour a little before that time, it is not without reason that the later people, who were also better known, should have inherited the fame of the earlier, who are entirely unknown to most men because of the lapse of time. <sup>3</sup> For our part, however, since we find that many early poets and historians, and not a few of the later ones as well, have made mention of them, we shall endeavour to recount their deeds in summary, following the account of Dionysius,<sup>7</sup> who composed a narrative about the Argonauts and Dionysus, and also about many other things which took place in the most ancient times. <sup>4</sup> Now there have been in Libya a number of races of women who were warlike and greatly admired for their manly vigour; for instance, tradition tells us of the race of the Gorgons, against whom, as the account is given, Perseus made war, a race distinguished <sup>p249</sup> for its valour; for the fact that it was the son of Zeus,<sup>8</sup> the mightiest Greek of his day, who accomplished the campaign against these women, and that this was his greatest Labour may be taken by any man as proof of both the pre-eminence and the power of the women we have mentioned. Furthermore, the manly prowess of those of whom we are now about to write presupposes an amazing pre-eminence when compared with the nature of the women of our day.

<sup>53</sup> <sup>1</sup> We are told, namely, that there was once on the western parts of Libya, on the bounds of the inhabited world, a race which was ruled by women and followed a manner of life unlike that which prevails among us. For it was the custom among them that the women should practise the arts of war and be required to serve in the army for a fixed period, during which time they maintained their virginity; then, when the years of their service in the field had expired, they went in to the men for the procreation of children, but they kept in their hands the administration of the magistracies and of all the affairs of the state. <sup>2</sup> The men, however, like our married women, spent their days about the house, carrying out the orders which were given them by their wives; and they took no part in military campaigns or in office or in the exercise of free citizenship<sup>9</sup> in the affairs of the community by virtue of which they might become presumptuous and rise up against the women. <sup>3</sup> When their children were born the babies were turned over to the men, who brought them up on milk and such cooked foods as were appropriate to the age of the infants; and if it happened that a girl was born, its breasts were <sup>p251</sup> seared that they might not develop at the time of maturity; for they thought that the breasts, as they stood out from the body, were no small hindrance in warfare; and in fact it is because they have been deprived of their breasts that they are called by the Greeks Amazons.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>4</sup> As mythology relates, their home was on an island which, because it was in the west, was called Hespera, and it lay in the marsh Tritonis. This marsh was near the ocean which surrounds the earth and received its name from a certain river Triton which emptied into it; and this marsh was also near Ethiopia and that mountain by the shore of the ocean which is the highest of those in the vicinity

and impinges upon the ocean and is called by the Greeks Atlas. 5 The island mentioned above was of great size and full of fruit-bearing trees of every kind, from which the natives secured their food. It contained also a multitude of flocks and herds, namely, of goats and sheep, from which possessors received milk and meat for their sustenance; but grain the nation used not at all because the use of this fruit of the earth had not yet been discovered among them.

6 The Amazons, then, the account continues, being a race superior in valour and eager for war, first of all subdued all the cities on the island except the one called Menê, which was considered to be sacred and was inhabited by Ethiopian Ichthyophagi, and was also subject to great eruptions of fire and possessed a multitude of the precious stones which the Greeks p253 call anthrax, sardion, and smaragdos;<sup>11</sup> and after this they subdued many of the neighbouring Libyans and nomad tribes, and founded within the marsh Tritonis a great city which they named Cherronesus<sup>12</sup> after its shape.

54 1 Setting out from the city of Cherronesus, the account continues, the Amazons embarked upon great ventures, a longing having come over them to invade many part of the inhabited world. The first people against whom they advanced, according to the tale, was the Atlantians, the most civilized men among the inhabitants of those regions, who dwelt in a prosperous country and possessed great cities; it was among them, we are told, that mythology places the birth of the gods, in the regions which lie along the shore of the ocean, in this respect agreeing with those among the Greeks who relate legends, and about this<sup>13</sup> we shall speak in detail a little later.

2 Now the queen of the Amazons, Myrina, collected, it is said, an army of thirty thousand foot-soldiers and three thousand cavalry, since they favoured to an unusual degree the use of cavalry in their wars.<sup>14</sup> 3 For protective devices they used the skins of large snakes, since Libya contains such animals of incredible size, and for offensive weapons, swords and lances; they also used bows and arrows, with which they struck not only when facing the enemy but also when in flight, by shooting backwards at their p255 pursuers with good effect. 4 Upon entering the land of the Atlantians they defeated in a pitched battle the inhabitants of the city of Cernê, as it is called, and making their way inside the walls along with the fleeing enemy, they got the city into their hands; and desiring to strike terror into the neighbouring peoples they treated the captives savagely, put to the sword the men from the youth upward, led into slavery the children and women, and razed the city. 5 But when the terrible fate of the inhabitants of Cernê became known among their fellow tribesmen, it is related that the Atlantians, struck with terror, surrendered their cities on terms of capitulation and announced that they would do whatever should be commanded them, and that the queen Myrina, bearing herself honourably towards the Atlantians, both established friendship with them and founded a city to bear her name in place of the city which had been razed; and in it she settled both the captives and any native who so desired. 6 Whereupon the Atlantians presented her with magnificent presents and by public decree voted to her notable honours, and she in return accepted their courtesy and in addition promised that she would show kindness to their nation. 7 And since the natives were often being warred upon by the Gorgons, as they were named, a folk which resided upon their borders, and in general had that people lying in wait to injure them, Myrina, they say, was asked by the Atlantians to invade the land of the afore-mentioned Gorgons. But when the Gorgons drew up their forces to resist them a mighty battle took place in which the Amazons, gaining the upper hand, slew great numbers of their opponents and took no fewer than p257 three thousand prisoners; and since the rest had fled for refuge into a certain wooded region, Myrina undertook to set fire to the timber, being eager to destroy the race utterly, but when she found that she was unable to succeed in her attempt she retired to the borders of her country.

[link to original Greek text] 55 1 Now as the Amazons, they go on to say, relaxed their watch during the night because of their success, the captive women, falling upon them and drawing the swords of those who thought they were conquerors, slew many of them; in the end, however, the multitude poured in about them from every side and the prisoners fighting bravely were butchered one and all. 2 Myrina accorded a funeral to her fallen comrades on three pyres and raised up three great heaps of earth as tombs, which are called to this day "Amazon Mounds." 3 But the Gorgons, grown strong again in later days, were subdued a second time by Perseus, the son of Zeus, when Medusa was queen over them; and in the end both they and the race of the Amazons were entirely destroyed by Heracles, when he visited the regions to the west and set up his pillars<sup>15</sup> in Libya, since he felt that it would ill accord with his resolve to be the benefactor of the whole race of mankind if he should suffer any nations to be under the rule of women. The story is also told that the marsh disappeared from sight in the course of an earthquake, when those parts of it which lay towards the ocean were torn asunder.

4 As for Myrina, the account continues, she visited the larger part of Libya, and passing over into p259 Egypt she struck a treaty of friendship with Horus, the son of Isis, who was king of Egypt at that time, and then, after making war to the end upon the Arabians and slaying many of them, she subdued Syria; but when the Cilicians came out with presents to meet her and agreed to obey her commands, she left those free who yielded to her of their free will and for this reason these are called to this day the "Free Cilicians." 5 She also conquered in war the races in the region of the Taurus, peoples of outstanding courage, and descended through Greater Phrygia to the sea;<sup>16</sup> and then she won over the land lying along the coast and fixed the bounds of her campaign at the Caïcus River.<sup>17</sup> 6 And selecting in the territory which she had won by arms sites well suited for the founding of cities, she built a considerable number of them and founded one<sup>18</sup> which bore her own name, but the others she named after the women who held the most important commands, such as Cymê, Pitana, and Priênê.

7 These, then, are the cities she settled along the sea, but others, and a larger number, she planted in the regions stretching towards the interior. She seized also some of the islands, and Lesbos in particular, on which she founded the city of Mitylenê, which was named after her sister who took part in the campaign. 8 After that, while subduing some of the rest of the islands, she was caught in a storm, and after she had offered up prayers for her safety to the Mother of the Gods,<sup>19</sup> she was carried to one of the uninhabited islands; this island, in obedience p261 to a vision which she beheld in her dreams, she made sacred to this goddess, and set up altars there and offered magnificent sacrifices. She also gave it the name of Samothrace, which means, when translated into Greek, "sacred island," although some historians say that it was formerly called Samos and was then given the name of Samothrace by Thracians who at one time dwelt on it. 9 However, after the Amazons had returned to the continent, the myth relates, the Mother of the Gods, well pleased with the island, settled in it certain other people, and also her own sons, who are known by the name of Corybantes — who their father was is handed down in their rites as a matter not to be divulged; and she established the mysteries which are now celebrated on the island and ordained by law that the sacred area should enjoy the right of sanctuary.

10 In these times, they go on to say, Mopsus the Thracian, who had been exiled by Lycurgus, the king of the Thracians, invaded the land of the Amazons with an army composed of fellow-exiles, and with Mopsus on the campaign was also Sipylus the Scythian, who had likewise been exiled from that part of Scythia which borders upon Thrace. 11 There was a pitched battle, Sipylus and Mopsus gained the upper hand, and Myrina, the queen of the Amazons, and the larger part of the rest of her army were slain. In the course of the years, as the Thracians continued to be victorious in their

battles, the surviving Amazons finally withdrew again into Libya. And such was the end, as the myth relates, of the campaign which the Amazons of Libya made. D.S. 3.52-5

## The Amazons in Asia

44 1 After these events there came in Scythia a period of revolutions, in which the sovereigns were women endowed with exceptional valour. For p31 among these peoples the women train for war just as do the men and in acts of manly valour are in no wise inferior to the men. Consequently distinguished women have been the authors of many great deeds, not in Scythia alone, but also in the territory bordering upon it. 2 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;<sup>25</sup> and the nation of the Amazons, after it was once organized, 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. 3 But for our part, since we have mentioned the Amazons, we feel that it is not foreign to our purpose to discuss them, even though what we shall say will be so marvellous that it will resemble a tale from mythology.

45 1 Now in the country along the Thermodon river,<sup>26</sup> as the account goes, the sovereignty was in the hands of a people among whom the women held the supreme power, and its women performed the services of war just as did the men. Of these women one, who possessed the royal authority, was remarkable for her prowess in war and her bodily strength, and gathering together an army of women she drilled it in the use of arms and subdued in war some of the neighbouring peoples. 2 And since her valour and fame increased, she made war upon p33 people after people of neighbouring lands, and as the tide of her fortune continued favourable, she was so filled with pride that she gave herself the appellation of Daughter of Ares; but to the men she assigned the spinning of wool and such other domestic duties as belong to women. Laws were also established by her, by virtue of which she led forth the women to the contests of war, but upon the men she fastened humiliation and slavery. 3 And as for their children, they mutilated both the legs and the arms of the males, incapacitating them in this way for the demands of war, and in the case of the females they seared the right breast that it might not project when their bodies matured and be in the way; and it is for this reason that the nation of the Amazons received the appellation it bears.<sup>27</sup> 4 In general, this queen was remarkable for her intelligence and ability as a general, and she founded a great city named Themiscyra at the mouth of the Thermodon river and built there a famous palace; furthermore, in her campaigns she devoted much attention to military discipline and at the outset subdued all her neighbours as far as the Tanaïs river. 5 And this queen, they say, accomplished the deeds which have been mentioned, and fighting brilliantly in a certain battle she ended her life heroically.

46 1 The daughter of this queen, the account continues, on succeeding to the throne emulated the excellence of her mother, and even surpassed her in p35 some particular deeds. For instance, she exercised in the chase the maidens from their earliest girlhood and drilled them daily in the arts of war, and she also established magnificent festivals both to Ares and to the Artemis who is called Tauropolus.<sup>28</sup> 2 Then she campaigned against the territory lying beyond the Tanaïs and subdued all the peoples one after another as far as Thrace; and returning to her native land with much booty she built magnificent shrines to the deities mentioned above, and by reason of her kindly rule over her

subjects received from them the greatest approbation. She also campaigned on the other side<sup>29</sup> and subdued a large part of Asia and extended her power as far as Syria.

3 After the death of this queen, as their account continues, women of her family, succeeding to the queenship from time to time, ruled with distinction and advanced the nation of the Amazons in both power and fame. And many generations after these events, when the excellence of these women had been noised abroad through the whole inhabited world, they say that Heracles, the son of Alcmenê and Zeus, was assigned by Eurystheus the Labour of securing the girdle of Hippolytê the Amazon.<sup>30</sup> 4 Consequently he embarked on this campaign, and coming off victorious in a great battle he not only cut to pieces the army of the Amazons but also, after taking captive Hippolytê together with her girdle, completely crushed this nation. Consequently the neighbouring barbarians, despising the weakness of p37 this people and remembering against them their past injuries, waged continuous wars against the nation to such a degree that they left in existence not even the name of the race of the Amazons. 5 For a few years after the campaign of Heracles against them, they say, during the time of the Trojan War, Penthesileia, the queen of the surviving Amazons, who was a daughter of Ares and had slain one of her kindred, fled from her native land because of the sacrilege.<sup>31</sup> And fighting as an ally of the Trojans after the death of Hector she slew many of the Greeks, and after gaining distinction in the struggle she ended her life heroically at the hands of Achilles. 6 Now they say that Penthesileia was the last of the Amazons to win distinction for bravery and that for the future the race diminished more and more and then lost all its strength; consequently in later times, whenever any writers recount their prowess, men consider the ancient stories about the Amazons to be fictitious tales. D.S. 2.44-6