

Meeting the Amazons: Alexander and Thalestris

The encounter between Alexander the Great and Thalestris, the mythical Queen of the Amazons, survives in several medieval and classical sources. Quintus Curtius Rufus's *Historiae Alexandri Magni*,¹ written in the first century CE, provides one of the fullest surviving classical prose accounts. Walter of Châtillon's twelfth-century Latin epic, the *Alexandreis*,² closely follows Rufus's narrative, adapting it into a moralised, courtly poetic form. By contrast, the *Historia de Preliis*,³ a medieval Alexander romance tradition surviving in multiple versions, presents a substantially altered account that reconfigures the encounter through epistolary exchange rather than physical meeting.

In both Rufus and Walter of Châtillon, the encounter occurs while Alexander is encamped at the boundary of Hyrcania during his eastern campaign. Thalestris enters the Macedonian camp accompanied by a female retinue, her authority immediately signalled through descriptions of the size of her realm. Both authors emphasise her distinctive dress, with one breast bared and her garment falling to the knee, and both recount the Amazonian tradition of searing the right nipple to facilitate the use of bows and spears.

When granted an audience with Alexander, Thalestris declares her intention to conceive a child by him. She proposes that any female offspring will remain with her, whereas a male child will be returned to Alexander. The king agrees and asks whether she will join him in battle, a request she refuses on the grounds that she must return to defend her own land. The two then spend thirteen nights together, after which Thalestris departs, having achieved her aim.

Walter of Châtillon's version is largely dependent on Rufus, as noted by Townsend,⁴ but introduces a revealing digression. On first seeing Alexander, Thalestris remarks on his 'meagre' body and wonders whether his virility is concealed elsewhere. This detail, absent from Rufus, introduces a sexual implication and briefly challenges Alexander's heroic image.

The *Historia de Preliis* presents a markedly different version. Rather than a face-to-face meeting, the encounter occurs through letters exchanged while Alexander is camped at the Caspian Gates. Alexander writes first, boasting of his victories and demanding tribute, threatening to conquer the Amazon queen. Thalestris replies with a defiant letter threatening him with 'shame and hardship', outlining the location, customs, and military strength of the Amazons, whom she claims number over 100,000. She argues that victory

¹ Curt. 6.5.24–32

² Chat. Alex. 8.1–48

³ Hist. de Prel. J1 77–79

⁴ Townsend, *Alexandreis*, introd., xvii.

over women would bring Alexander no glory and refers to the Amazonian custom of limited contact with men. Alexander responds, offering either battle in the mountains or a peaceful meeting by a nearby river, swearing her safety. Thalestris ultimately sends tribute, and no further letters are exchanged.

These accounts demonstrate how the episode was reshaped to suit different literary and cultural contexts. Rufus and Walter present closely aligned versions of the encounter, whereas the *Historia de Preliis* reframes it as a test of power resolved through words rather than intimacy. Overall, the sources illustrate how the same encounter can be reconfigured in structure and emphasis, with the Amazon queen serving as a literary symbol of Alexander's power and prowess.

Bibliography

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