

Greek History and Literature

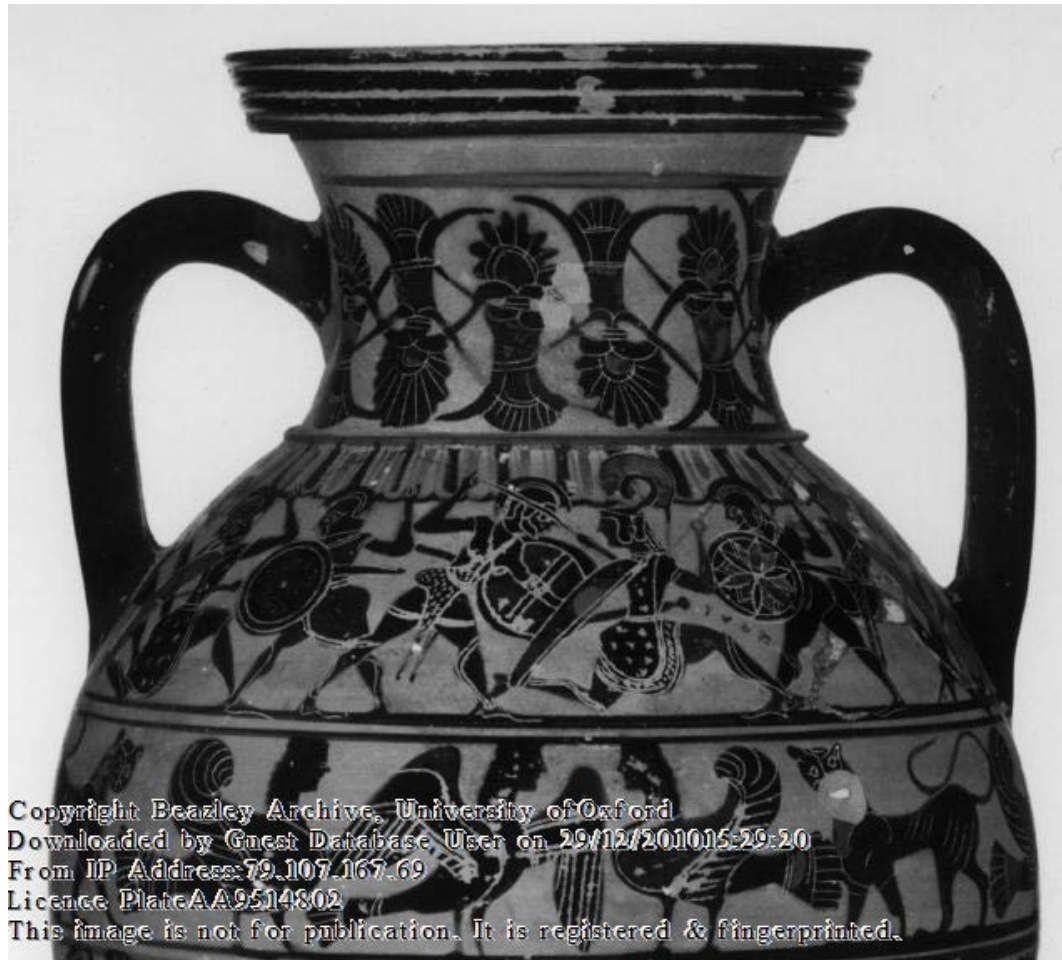
Homer and the Amazons I

- And he was husband's brother to shameless me, as sure as ever such a one there was. So spake she, and the old man was seized with wonder, and said: Ah, happy son of Atreus, child of fortune, blest of heaven; now see I that youths of the Achaeans full many are made subject unto thee. Ere now have I journeyed to the land of Phrygia, rich in vines, [185] and there I saw in multitudes the Phrygian warriors, masters of glancing steeds, even the people of Otreus and godlike Mygdon, that were then encamped along the banks of Sangarius. For I, too, being their ally, was numbered among them on the day when the Amazons came, the peers of men. [190] Howbeit not even they were as many as are the bright-eyed Achaeans. Homer, *Iliad* 3.180-190 (transl. Murray 1924)

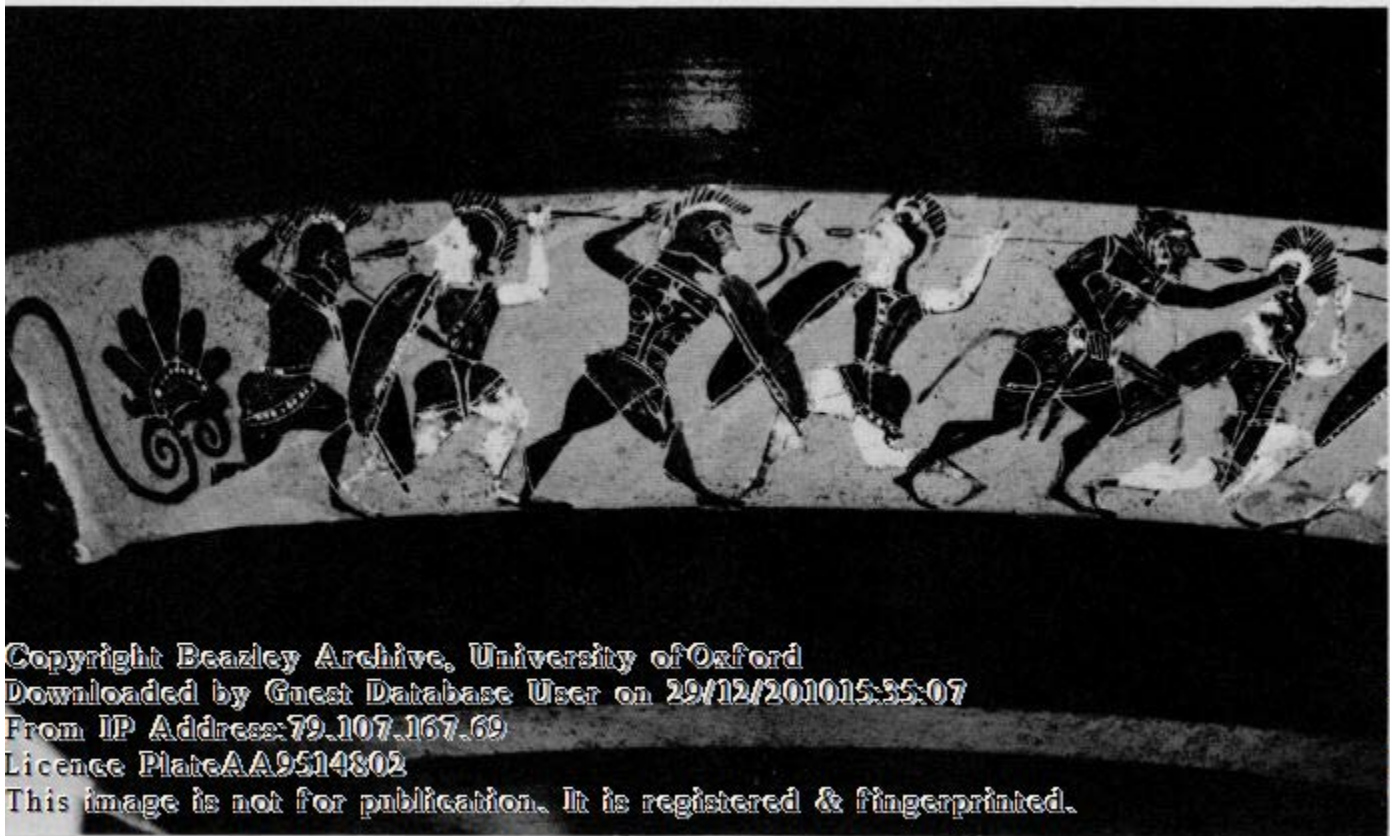
Homer and the Amazons II

- So she made a tale of lies, and spake to king Proetus: Either die thyself, Proetus, or slay Bellerophon, [165] seeing he was minded to lie with me in love against my will. So she spake, and wrath gat hold upon the king to hear that word. To slay him he forbore, for his soul had awe of that; but he sent him to Lycia, and gave him baneful tokens, graving in a folded tablet many signs and deadly, [170] and bade him show these to his own wife's father, that he might be slain. So he went his way to Lycia under the blameless escort of the gods. And when he was come to Lycia and the stream of Xanthus, then with a ready heart did the king of wide Lycia do him honour: for nine days' space he shewed him entertainment, and slew nine oxen. Howbeit when the tenth rosy-fingered Dawn appeared, [175] then at length he questioned him and asked to see whatever token he bore from his daughter's husband, Proetus. But when he had received from him the evil token of his daughter's husband, first he bade him slay the raging **Chimaera**. [180] She was of divine stock, not of men, in the fore part a lion, in the hinder a serpent, and in the midst a goat, breathing forth in terrible wise the might of blazing fire. And Bellerophon slew her, trusting in the signs of the gods. Next fought he with the glorious **Solymi**, [185] and this, said he was the mightiest battle of warriors that ever he entered; and thirdly he slew the **Amazons**, women the peers of men. And against him, as he journeyed back therefrom, the king wove another cunning wile; he chose out of wide **Lycia the bravest men** and set an ambush; but these returned not home in any wise, [190] for peerless Bellerophon slew them one and all. Homer *Iliad* 6.164-190 (transl. Murray 1924).

Amazons in Archaic vase-painting

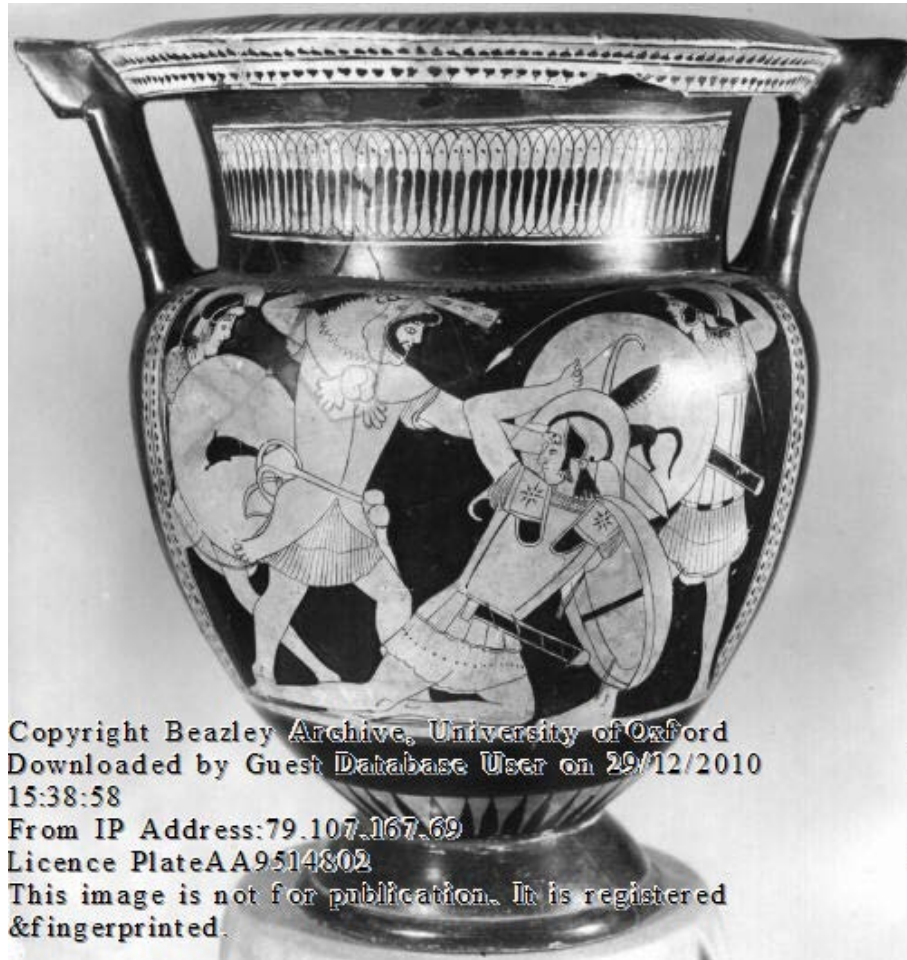


Amazons in Archaic Vase painting (before 525)



425, Hamburg, Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, 1961.61

Amazons in the early 5th century



Amazons and the Sauromatae I

- About the Sauromatae, the story is as follows. When the Greeks were at war with the Amazons (whom the Scythians call Oiorpata, a name signifying in our tongue killers of men, for in Scythian a man is “oior” and to kill is “pata”), the story runs that after their victory on the Thermodon they sailed away carrying in three ships as many Amazons as they had been able to take alive; and out at sea the Amazons attacked the crews and killed them. [2] But they knew nothing about ships, or how to use rudder or sail or oar; and with the men dead, they were at the mercy of waves and winds, until they came to the Cliffs by the Maeetian lake; this place is in the country of the free Scythians. The Amazons landed there, and set out on their journey to the inhabited country, and seizing the first troop of horses they met, they mounted them and raided the Scythian lands. CXI. The Scythians could not understand the business; for they did not recognize the women's speech or their dress or their nation, but wondered where they had come from, and imagined them to be men all of the same age; and they met the Amazons in battle. The result of the fight was that the Scythians got possession of the dead, and so came to learn that their foes were women. [2] Therefore, after deliberation they resolved by no means to slay them as before, but to send their youngest men to them, of a number corresponding (as they guessed) to the number of the women. They directed these youths to camp near the Amazons and to imitate all that they did; if the women pursued them, not to fight, but to flee; and when the pursuit stopped, to return and camp near them. This was the plan of the Scythians, for they desired that children be born of the women. The young men who were sent did as they were directed.

Amazons and the Sauromatae II

- When the Amazons perceived that the youths meant them no harm, they let them be; but every day the two camps drew nearer to each other. Now the young men, like the Amazons, had nothing but their arms and their horses, and lived as did the women, by hunting and plunder. CXIII. At midday the Amazons would scatter and go apart from each other singly or in pairs, roaming apart for greater comfort. The Scythians noticed this and did likewise; and as the women wandered alone, a young man laid hold of one of them, and the woman did not resist but let him do his will; [2] and since they did not understand each other's speech and she could not speak to him, she signed with her hand that he should come the next day to the same place and bring another youth with him (showing by signs that there should be two), and she would bring another woman with her. [3] The youth went away and told his comrades; and the next day he came himself with another to the place, where he found the Amazon and another with her awaiting them. When the rest of the young men learned of this, they had intercourse with the rest of the Amazons. CXIV. Presently they joined their camps and lived together, each man having for his wife the woman with whom he had had intercourse at first.

Amazons and the Sauromatae III

- Now the men could not learn the women's language, but the women mastered the speech of the men; [2] and when they understood each other, the men said to the Amazons, "We have parents and possessions; therefore, let us no longer live as we do, but return to our people and be with them; and we will still have you, and no others, for our wives." To this the women replied: [3] "We could not live with your women; for we and they do not have the same customs. We shoot the bow and throw the javelin and ride, but have never learned women's work; and your women do none of the things of which we speak, but stay in their wagons and do women's work, and do not go out hunting or anywhere else. [4] So we could never agree with them. If you want to keep us for wives and to have the name of fair men, go to your parents and let them give you the allotted share of their possessions, and after that let us go and live by ourselves." The young men agreed and did this. CXV. So when they had been given the allotted share of possessions that fell to them, and returned to the Amazons, the women said to them: [2] "We are worried and frightened how we are to live in this country after depriving you of your fathers and doing a lot of harm to your land. [3] Since you propose to have us for wives, do this with us: come, let us leave this country and live across the Tanaïs river." CXVI. To this too the youths agreed; and crossing the Tanaïs, they went a three days' journey east from the river, and a three days' journey north from lake Maeetis; and when they came to the region in which they now live, they settled there. [2] Ever since then the women of the Sauromatae have followed their ancient ways; they ride out hunting, with their men or without them; they go to war, and dress the same as the men. Herodotos 4.110-116 (transl. Godley 1920)

Another view on the Sauromatae

- In Europe there is a Scythian race, called Sauromatae, which inhabits the confines of the Palus Maeotis, and is different from all other races. Their women mount on horseback, use the bow, and throw the javelin from their horses, and fight with their enemies as long as they are virgins; and they do not lay aside their virginity until they kill three of their enemies, nor have any connection with men until they perform the sacrifices according to law. Whoever takes to herself a husband, gives up riding on horseback unless the necessity of a general expedition obliges her. They have no right breast; for while still of a tender age their mothers heat strongly a copper instrument constructed for this very purpose, and apply it to the right breast, which is burnt up, and its development being arrested, all the strength and fullness are determined to the right shoulder and arm. Hippocrates, *Airs, Waters, Places*, section 17 (transl. Adams)

Amazons in mid 5th century art



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Amazons and Athens

- And I am of the same mind also regarding public affairs. For I think that we ought not to be proud or even satisfied should we have shown ourselves more law-regarding than men accursed by the gods and afflicted with madness, but ought much rather to feel aggrieved and resentful should we prove to be worse than our ancestors; for it is their excellence and not the depravity of the Thirty which we should strive to emulate, especially since it behoves Athenians to be the best among mankind. [74] This is not the first time that I have expressed this sentiment; I have done so many times and before many people. For I know that while other regions produce varieties of fruits and trees and animals, each peculiar to its locality and much better than those of other lands, our own country is able to bear and nurture men who are not only the most gifted in the world in the arts and in the powers of action and of speech, but are also above all others in valor and in virtue. [75] This conclusion we may justly draw from the ancient struggles which they carried on against the Amazons and the Thracians and all of the Peloponnesians, and also from the wars which they waged against the Persians, in which, both when they fought alone and when they were aided by the Peloponnesians, whether on land or on the sea, they were victorious over the barbarians and were adjudged the meed of valor; for they could not have achieved these things, had they not far surpassed other men in the endowments of nature. Isokrates 7.73-5 (transl. Norlin 1980)

Amazonomachy Mid 4th BCE



Harvard 1960.367 From the Perseus Digital Library:
<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/>

Amazons in the Hellenistic period

- When Alexander returned to Hyrcania, there came to him the queen of the Amazons named Thallestris, who ruled all the country between the rivers Phasis and Thermodon. She was remarkable for beauty and for bodily strength, and was admired by her countrywomen for bravery. She had left the bulk of her army on the frontier of Hyrcania and had arrived with an escort of three hundred Amazons in full armour. [2] The king marvelled at the unexpected arrival and the dignity of the women. When he asked Thallestris why she had come, she replied that it was for the purpose of getting a child. [3] He had shown himself the greatest of all men in his achievements, and she was superior to all women in strength and courage, so that presumably the offspring of such outstanding parents would surpass all other mortals in excellence. At this the king was delighted and granted her request and consorted with her for thirteen days, after which he honoured her with fine gifts and sent her home. Diodoros Siculus *Bibliothēke* 17.77.1 (transl. Oldfather 1989).

Amazons as subjects in vase painting over time

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Amazons and the Romans I

- The Amazons, also, are said to live in the mountains above Albania. Now Theophanes, who made the expedition with Pompey and was in the country of the Albanians, says that the Gelae and the Legae, Scythian people, live between the Amazons and the Albanians, and that the Mermadalis River flows there, midway between these people and the Amazons. But others, among whom are Metrodorus of Scepsis and Hypsicrates, who themselves, likewise, were not unacquainted with the region in question, say that the Amazons live on the borders of the Gargarians, in the northerly foothills of those parts of the Caucasian Mountains which are called Ceraunian; that the Amazons spend the rest of their time off to themselves, performing their several individual tasks, such as ploughing, planting, pasturing cattle, and particularly in training horses, though the bravest engage mostly in hunting on horseback and practise warlike exercises; that the right breasts of all are seared when they are infants, so that they can easily use their right arm for every needed purpose, and especially that of throwing the javelin; that they also use bow and sagaris and light shield, and make the skins of wild animals serve as helmets, clothing, and girdles; but that they have two special months in the spring in which they go up into the neighboring mountain which separates them and the Gargarians.

Amazons and the Romans II

- The Gargarians also, in accordance with an ancient custom, go up thither to offer sacrifice with the Amazons and also to have intercourse with them for the sake of begetting children, doing this in secrecy and darkness, any Gargarian at random with any Amazon; and after making them pregnant they send them away; and the females that are born are retained by the Amazons themselves, but the males are taken to the Gargarians to be brought up; and each Gargarian to whom a child is brought adopts the child as his own, regarding the child as his son because of his uncertainty. Strabo 11.5.1 (transl. Jones 1924).

Amazons as monsters

- ...They relinquished all thought of marrying with their neighbors, saying it would be slavery, not matrimony. Venturing to set an example imitated through all generations, they established their government without the aid of men, and soon maintained their power in defiance of them. And that none of their females might seem more fortunate than others, they put to death all the men who had remained at home. They also took revenge for their husbands that were killed in war, by a great slaughter of their neighbors. Having thus secured peace by means of their arms, they proceeded, in order that their race might not fall, to form connections with the men of the adjacent nations. If any male children were born, they put them to death. The girls they bred up to the same mode of life as themselves, not consigning them to idleness, or working in wool, but training them to arms, the management of horses, and hunting. They burned their right breasts in infancy, that their use of the bow might not be obstructed by them: and hence they were called Amazons. Justin 2.4