

# Amazons as Role Models?

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**Abstract:** It is a moot point whether the Greeks would have developed myths about Amazons even if they had never heard about female warriors. Be that as it may, their mythical Amazons fulfill several ideological functions. The most important of those is probably to represent an unnatural menace which has been successfully defeated by the Greeks. However, there is no denying that from the late sixth century onwards the Greek depiction of Amazons, on vases or in writing, has often (but not always) been influenced by their knowledge of Sarmatian mounted archeresses, at least some of whom were almost certainly also warriors. Yet it is naive to say that the Greeks were right all the time, that Amazons did exist and that they had a wonderful time killing enemies and living a life characterised by companionship, fulfilled sexuality and gender equality. The Amazons constructed by Adrienne Mayor resemble the heroines of Klingon legend told by Klingons in the *Star Trek* spin offs.

**Keywords:** Amazons, Sarmatians, archeresses, *Star Trek*, Klingons.

By its very nature, the question whether the Greeks would have developed myths about Amazons in the sense of “matriarchal tribes of female warriors” even if they had never heard about societies in which women could go (or, rather, ride) to war as well as men cannot be answered either way. Amazons are first mentioned in the *Iliad* (3, 189 and 6, 186), i.e., in a text which, though set in northern Asia minor, shows no familiarity with the ethnography of the northern shores of the Black Sea and the plains of the Lower Volga, where some of the tribes we call, for want of better terms, Scythians and Sarmatians (or Sauromatians) buried women who were certainly archeresses and probably warriors in

impressive tombs.<sup>1</sup> True, there are also some early isolated cases of tombs of armed women in the Caucasus region, but the author or authors of the Iliad and the Odyssey didn't even realize the Black Sea was not directly connected to the Ocean.<sup>2</sup> The author or authors of the said verses of the Iliad didn't link the Amazons to the northern shore of the Black Sea region at all. He or they thought of the Amazons as an exclusively female tribe; that this is the result of some misunderstanding is possible, but it is by no means "an inescapable conclusion" that "*Amazones* was not a name for a women-only entity", as Adrienne Mayor asserts<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup>Both the dating and the composition of the Iliad are highly controversial; I tend to follow the majority of my colleagues who currently favour a date of about 700 B.C., give or take a few decades, but the danger of circular reasoning is considerable. For the archeological records, see Rolle 1986 and 2011. As for the ethnonymic "Scythians", I use this term for the peoples who a) lived on the Northern shores of the Black Sea and in the steppes north of the Caucasus in the first millennium B.C. and b) spoke Iranian dialects.

<sup>2</sup>As has been shown conclusively by Martin L. West (2007), the terminus post quem for the identification of Colchis with present day Georgia and of the river Phasis with present day Rioni is the sixth century B.C. For a brief but sound introduction to the history of cultural contact between the Greeks and the populations of the Black Sea shores, see Bähler 2005.

<sup>3</sup>Mayor 2014, 22. While it is certainly true that the ethnonymic *Amazones* "does not have the feminine ending that one would expect if the group consisted only of women", this argument is inconclusive as we are dealing with a non-Greek word anyway. Nor does the Homeric adjective *antianeirai*, even if it probably means "equal to men" and not "hating men", imply the Amazons of archaic Greek myth practiced gender equality, as Mayor claims p. 24. Her whole book oscillates between the eminently sensible and the totally erratic, usually in ways only diligent and well informed scholars can spot, but what about p.149 where she tries to reconcile her theory that the Scythians were "sophisticated hemp smokers" with the facts that a) "the prime buds produce the strongest high" and b) what we find on Scythian sites are charred seeds? Instead of admitting that either the Scythians didn't get that high or that they used a different kind of hemp, she asserts: "buds, of course, contain seeds." This mixture of confidence and partial ignorance, particularly where linguistics

At any rate, we would be wrong to believe that *all* myths are based on historical facts, as some scholars still thought in the 19th century. The Greeks and Romans were imaginative and certainly capable of inventing any number of good and fanciful stories, both for enjoyment and for ideological reasons, which is why, while keeping an open mind, I tend to answer my initial question in the affirmative. At the very least Amazons, like the centaurs which are often portrayed on the same monuments, represent what the Greeks saw as alterity.<sup>4</sup> But let me get this straight: while there are instances in which structuralism is heuristically valuable, structuralists tend to overdo things, and the abuse of the word „alterity” is a case in point, especially where Herodotus’ description of the Scythians is concerned. He may exaggerate, but he knows far more about the Scythians than Hartog gives him credit for, and Mayor’s book, while often demonstrably wrong, is refreshingly free from the kind of pompous absurdities spouted by Hartog and his followers.<sup>5</sup> However, it is true that in official Athenian propaganda the Amazons constitute an unnatural menace, a terrible danger successfully averted by the Greeks in general and the Athenians in particular: formidable female warriors who allegedly penetrated

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are concerned, too often mars what could have been a very good book. Of course partial ignorance of some of the subject matter is unavoidable in a book as far ranging as Mayor’s, but scholars ought to admit to their limitations.- As for the Greek names of the Amazons, Pindar preferred the exclusively feminine formation *Amazonides* (Olympian 13, 87), but in his case metrical reasons were probably more important than a preoccupation with etymology. The same goes for Apollonios of Rhodes (2, 386).

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. Vlassopoulos 2013, p.267.

<sup>5</sup> For a criticism of Hartog’s approach, see Bäßler 2011. Unlike Hartog, Mayor takes both Herodotus and his subject matter seriously.

deeply into mainland Greek territory, at least once reaching the walls of Athens herself<sup>6</sup>.

Now, it is essential to keep in mind that the notion that women are, by their very nature, more peaceful than men is a relatively modern concept and totally absent in ancient Greece and Rome. This does not mean that, to the Greeks and Romans, when it comes to violence women are just as good or just as bad as men. The contrary is true: in their eyes, women are far more lacking in self control and thus more cruel than men by nature; it is only nurture which determines whether they will turn out to be good wives and mothers or murderesses,<sup>7</sup> which is why Adrienne Mayor's theory that Amazons (unfortunately Mayor uses this term in far too wide a sense) may have been seen as some sort of secret role model at least by Greek women is inherently improbable. Young Greek girls may have played with the occasional Amazon doll, but we have no means of knowing how they felt about actual warrior women. The fact, rightly pointed out by Mayor (perhaps a bit too often), that the Greeks and Romans consistently portrayed Amazons as extremely attractive and desirable, doesn't prove what Mayor wants it to prove but rather the contrary: such women are dangerous, particularly if they are as sexually active as Mayor portrays them again and again, and Greeks and Romans did not go in for dangerous women.<sup>8</sup> There probably were some exceptions, but our evidence for this assumption is not so much circumstantial as nonexistent. However, I tend to agree with Mayor's speculation that some Greeks and Romans secretly longed for real companionship with women who willingly or even

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<sup>6</sup> See Dowden 1997. Amazons are seen as a danger to civilization, rather like centaurs, for which see Osborne 1994.

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. Carlier 1979, p. 381; for other women see e.g. Euripides' *Medea*...

<sup>8</sup> The danger posed by attractive and/or sexually over-active women is one of the recurrent themes in e.g. Hesiod's *Works and Days*, not to mention most versions of the story of Helen of Troy.

enthusiastically shared the dangers they had to or chose to affront, but those women were not Amazons.

What Mayor alleges Xenophon wrote about the fate of the women taken captive by the Greeks (a kind of Stockholm syndrome story) has been cobbled together from just a few very brief and insubstantial passages which do mention women, but it is highly unlikely that the same women are meant in every instance<sup>9</sup>. Also, we should really bear in mind that *hetaira*, in Classical (as opposed to Archaic) Greek, when used by a man about a woman, means “companion” only in the sense of “prostitute.”<sup>10</sup> Even more importantly, it is improbable that the Greeks boasted “that they had Amazons as their companions in love and war.”<sup>11</sup> Rather, what Xenophon quotes in *Anabasis* 6, 1, 12-13 is just what Demetrius says it is in his treatise *On Style*, ch. 131: a joke, whether the Greeks claim (contrary to fact) that their female entourage consists of Amazons or sneer at the Persian High king whose troupes are so weak even women can defeat them.<sup>12</sup> That this is not what actually happened, neither at the battle of Cunaxa nor afterwards, ought to be obvious: there is no other mention of women fighting in battle in the *Anabasis*! And it gets worse: the “tall and beautiful” women and virgins of the Medes and Persians are perceived as a real danger in 3, 2, 25 by Xenophon because, together with all the other amenities of life in Persia, they could cause the Greeks to behave like Ulysses’ companions in the land of the Lotus Eaters. This is a difficult

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<sup>9</sup> Mayor 2014, p. 140, quoting, not Xenophon, but Lee 2007, 270-273: a textbook example of the Chinese whispers effect. While Lee admits he is just hazarding guesses and points out the limits of what we may glean from Xenophon’s account, Mayor is overconfident.

<sup>10</sup> The idea that “companion” may mean an (in this case, accomplished) prostitute has been ably exploited by the authors of the Science Fiction series *Firefly* (2002); see Wenskus 2009, p.10, n.6.

<sup>11</sup> Mayor 2014, p.141.

<sup>12</sup> See Flowers 2012, p. 184-185.

passage, but the reference to the Lotus Eaters can only have negative connotations<sup>13</sup>, and there is nothing either here or later in the text to suggest those potentially effeminating women became plucky fighters after bonding with their captors.

If an Amazon, as seems to be the case in some versions of the myth of Theseus, bonds with a Greek she ceases to be an Amazon and usually dies soon afterwards. As far as Greek genealogy is concerned, they are a “dead end”, with one seeming exception: the Amazon mother of Theseus’ son Hippolytus. Hippolytus, however, dies not only without offspring but, at least in the versions told by Euripides (in his *Hippolytos Stephanophoros* and probably also in the same poet’s lost *Hippolytos Kalyptomenos*) and Seneca (in his *Phaedra*), a virgin.<sup>14</sup> A real Amazon is never permanently on your side if you happen to be a male, and this was particularly worrying for the Greeks of the Archaic and Classical age with their ethics, definition of justice even, of “helping friends and harming enemies”.<sup>15</sup> Euripides’ Medea, while not an Amazon, is a case in point: she has done horrible things to Jason’s enemies in order to help him but as soon as she sees herself slighted by him she does horrible things to his friends, even going as far as killing her own children, whom she loves, i.e., she harms her “friends” (the Greek term *philos* also covers family members) in order to harm her enemies.

The Greeks and Romans usually describe Amazons as aggressive and often as cruel, with the interesting result that their stories or reports about Amazons exhibit the same contradictory tendencies as modern horror stories: on the one hand, total annihilation of the monsters makes the most satisfactory ending; on the other hand, we want our authors to go on telling us scary

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<sup>13</sup> Flowers 2012, 181-182.

<sup>14</sup> See Dowden 1997, p. 99-103, and Wenskus 2000.

<sup>15</sup> See Blundell 1989.

stories, and if said authors find it hard to invent ever new types of even more horrible monsters they have to use a storyline of the “Something has survived”-type.<sup>16</sup> It is for this very reason that our sources locate Amazons more often than not in a safe distance, both in time and in space, usually in northern Asia Minor or Thrace, in later sources also in northern Africa or other, preferably inaccessible, regions of the Old World.

Not only for prudence’s sake but also in order to avoid redundancy we should distinguish, carefully and consistently, between mythical Amazons on the one hand and Scythian mounted archeresses of the early Iron Age. Mythical Amazons<sup>17</sup> live in a strictly matriarchal society, often meeting men only for the purpose of war or procreation. Scythian and Sarmatian mounted archeresses, on the other hand, were fully integrated in a patriarchal society consisting, a fact Mayor rather glosses over and often doesn’t take any notice of altogether, also of women who habitually wore skirts totally unsuited for riding, to judge from the archaeological record. Those „feminine” women probably never fought in their lives, which were, in the case of those Scythians who practiced nomadism, spent on wagons. The author of the pseudo-Hippocratic treatise *On Airs Waters Places* even portrays all free women of the Scythian nomads as pathologically flabby (ch. 21-22), thus exaggerating but possibly in the right direction: Scythian mounted archeresses may not have been the norm Mayor makes them out to be but rather striking exceptions.<sup>18</sup> We have to try very hard indeed to avoid the

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<sup>16</sup> See Carlier 1979; Wenskus 2000, p. 64-65.

<sup>17</sup> I use the term “Amazons” in the same way the Greeks and Romans did; Mayor’s strategy to call every warlike woman an Amazon only serves to cloud the issue.

<sup>18</sup> For *Airs Waters Places*, see Wenskus 1999, p.176-177 and 182 n. 8. Unfortunately this note contains a typo: in the older editions the word *roikos* (20, 2; twice) should have no diaeresis, *roikos* with diaeresis is a conjecture of Jouanna’s (who is probably right). As regards the date of *Airs, Waters, Places*,

systematic error known as the saliency effect, i.e. the automatic tendency to overestimate the frequency and/or importance of single striking facts, and I must admit quite frankly that in my earlier publications on the Amazons I too may have made this very same mistake.<sup>19</sup> However, I am not saying I got my facts wrong then, just that I should not have been so sure as to automatically assume that the reports of the author of *Airs, Waters, Places* concerning the sedentary life style of the Scythian nomad women were wildly exaggerated. Exaggerated they are, but how much? We do not know, but it is entirely possible that our author (or his informants) never saw a mounted Scythian archeress although they actually travelled along the shores of the Black Sea: note that the prime addressees of *Airs, Waters, Places* are traveling physicians. Those who managed to catch the magnificent exposition “*L’Oro degli Sciti*” when it toured Italy in the late Seventies, as I did in Florence, and /or get hold of the catalogue, will notice that none of the many stunning exhibits show any evidence of armed or mounted women, nor is there any mention of them in the texts of the catalogue.<sup>20</sup>

Another temptation too many scholars of both sexes yield to (possibly encouraged by their publishers) is that of considering the whole huge region around the Black Sea and, in the case of *Mayor*, Thrace and Central Asia as well, as more or less homogenous. If they didn’t they couldn’t explain the myths regarding Amazons “historically”. But those “historicizing“

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Dowden 1997, p.109, is right to say that we do not actually know it, but he is almost certainly wrong to claim this treatise could be influenced by Ephoros (ca. 400-330). In this case we would expect far more advanced medical theories. The traditional date (late fifth century) fits the facts far better; see Jouanna 1996, p. 79-82. For *Mayor*’s exaggerations, see e.g. her p. 216 “Every nomad boy and girl, man and woman, owned a bow and arrow.”

<sup>19</sup> See Wenskus 1999, p. 179, and 2000, p. 70. For the insurmountable methodological problems see Hopkins 1987.

<sup>20</sup> Barkova 1977 and others.



explanations are somewhat naive in assuming the Greeks were incredibly naive. The Greeks did not misunderstand garbled or exaggerated accounts of warrior women. Rather, they both explained the existence of mounted archeresses with the aid of their myths about Amazons, probably misrepresenting to a certain degree what they or their source had actually seen in Scythian and Sarmatian territory, and were influenced by the spectacularly exotic garb of those female riders when representing Amazons, particularly on vase paintings.<sup>21</sup> Until the sixth century B.C. mythical Amazons are depicted as battling on foot, usually in Greek garb (or, rather, the same kind of garb their male opponents are shown as wearing, provided those are not shown in „heroic nudity” or partial nudity), and some artists continue to represent Amazon contingents as infantry. But from the sixth century B.C. onwards knowledge about the attire of mounted archeresses of the Iranian tribes on the northern shores of the Black Sea and particularly the Sarmatian (or Sauromatian) territory on the banks of the Lower Volga is fairly widespread among Greek vase painters who now frequently, if not always, show mythical Amazons dressed, armed and mounted like said contemporary archeresses, and give them names proclaiming them to be riders or, at the very least, connected to horses.

It is extremely likely the Scythian and particularly the Sarmatian mounted archeresses<sup>22</sup> actually rode into battle, but as our written sources are, as should be obvious by now, not totally reliable, we have to rely on archeological evidence, which is not only open to multiple interpretations but not even necessarily representative. Paleopathological research has shown beyond reasonable doubt that at least some of the women buried as riders and archeresses had indeed spent considerable time on horseback and practised archery; some even show evidence of lethal wounds

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<sup>21</sup> For Greek iconography, see Devambez, 1981.

<sup>22</sup> For the archaeological record see Rolle 1986 and 2011.

inflicted by weapons of war. True, all this can be explained by the practice of hunting or combative sports and particularly the necessity of protecting the herds from predators and/or horse and cattle thieves, but combats with rustlers can develop into out-and-out warfare (or be viewed as such), and the important point is that those women certainly lived very active and often dangerous lives. But how many of them were there? We just do not know. We only have the mortal remains of a tiny percentage of the members of those populations: far too little to be statistically significant. What we do know with a reasonable degree of probability is that all those archeresses were fully integrated into societies dominated by men, consisting of a) men dressed in trousers or leggings; b) women dressed in skirts, and c) women dressed in trousers or leggings.<sup>23</sup> It is almost certainly wrong to assume those societies practised gender equality, as Mayor does.

As far as we know there were no Scythian or Sarmatian<sup>24</sup> queens, although things may have been different among the Massagetes, whether we believe one of the mutually exclusive reports about the role of their alleged queen Tomyris or not. It should be needless to say that there is no evidence that any of those groups of warlike women enjoyed better or more frequent sex than most, but as Mayor repeats this statement ad nauseam in her book and as her statements are too often taken at face value, I have to point it out anyway.

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<sup>23</sup> The alleged existence of cross-dressing impotent Scythian males has, to my knowledge, left no archeological record. We have to take (or, of course, question) the word of the anonymous author of the Hippocratic treatise *On Airs Waters Places* for the time being. For a probable paleopathological explanation see Lieber, 1996.

<sup>24</sup> Our Greek sources seem to use the terms “Sarmatians” and “Sauromatians” indiscriminately, but we cannot be entirely sure whether they were right to do so.

The Greeks usually didn't identify the fighting Sarmatians of their ethnographical records with the Amazons of their own traditions, but they did invent stories to explain both the similarities and the differences<sup>25</sup>. Herodotus 4, 110-117 is a case in point: according to his tale, which sounds good but is just an ad hoc explanation<sup>26</sup>, the last surviving Amazons, finding themselves adrift on the Black Sea and not knowing anything about boats, ended up on the northern shore of the Black Sea, engaged young Scythians in combat, then bonded with them and decided to emigrate with them, thus founding a new tribe, viz. the Sauromatians. According to Herodotus 4, 110 the Scythians call the Amazons "Oiorpata", i.e. "man killers"<sup>27</sup>, but neither Herodotus nor the anonymous physician who wrote the Hippocratic treatise *On Airs, Waters, Places* (ch. 17) seem to realise that there were at least some "Oiorpata" among the Black Sea Scythians as well, possibly because they constituted a minority.

On the other hand, Herodotus and the Hippocratic author are probably exaggerating when they claim every Sauromatian virgin had to live the life of a warrior before she could get married; Herodotus 4, 117 says they had to kill one enemy before their wedding; *Airs, Waters, Places* 17, 2 says they had to kill three before giving up their virginity,<sup>28</sup> and to perform the

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<sup>25</sup> Dowden 1997, p.108; Wenskus 2000, p.69.

<sup>26</sup> This type of explanation is characteristic of early Greek historiography and much of bad modern "scholarship". An ad hoc explanation is an explanation for which there is no actual evidence but which would indeed explain the fact it sets out to explain if it were true.

<sup>27</sup> According to Herodotus, that is, but this translation is probably wrong; see Hinge 2006. However, Hinge's own explanation isn't convincing either.

<sup>28</sup> Whatever that means. Ancient concepts of virginity, at least where young female barbarians are concerned, do not necessarily imply physiological virginity, but as *Airs, Waters, Places* is a medical text this is probably the case here. However, it is not the same thing as virginity in our, i.e. the judeo-christian sense; see Sissa 1990. And this case is particularly dubious because

customary sacrifices before “living together” with their respective husbands. If this were the case we would expect a far higher percentage of female warriors to show up in our archeological record. And then there are statements which suggests that both Greek myths about Amazons and Greek popular ethics distorted our authors’ perception of the Sarmatians. Unlike Herodotus the author of *Airs, Waters, Places* says only the virgins of the Sauromatians regularly rode to war, but our archeological evidence shows that even mothers did not always give up their social role of mounted archeress. But then our author leaves a loophole, saying married Sauromatian women do ride to war when necessary. So what is Greek about the statement that only virgins ride to war? For one thing, for a Greek woman, officially moving into her husband’s household with the aim of bearing legitimate children (this is the definition of marriage, at least in Classical Athens), is far more life-changing than marriage is for most contemporary young Western women.

One of the results of this attitude is that Greeks tend to view the behaviour of young unmarried female barbarians with surprising tolerance and even give their own virgins a certain leeway, if only in unusual circumstances and only if said virgins depart from their normal behaviour in order to help male relatives in distress. As regards riding, while most young Greek girls probably didn’t learn their way around horses (or mules), there is at least one significant exception in Classical Greek literature: Ismene in Sophocles’ *Oedipus at Colonus* (represented posthumously in 401 B.C.). While Antigone has followed her blind father into exile, her sister Ismene has stayed in Thebes as a sort of secret agent for Oedipus and is now shown (or imagined) to have ridden on horseback all the way from Thebes to Colonus, a

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our author or his source may have misunderstood his informant. As regards marriage, there is no single Greek word which unequivocally means “marry.”

hill north-west of Classical Athens, in order to warn her father of impending danger. Her father then goes on to praise his daughters, comparing them, however, not to Amazons (not even Ismene), but to Egyptian women who, according to Oedipus, behave as Greek men do.<sup>29</sup> And why? Because Oedipus' sons did not do their duty. Sophocles takes no account (perhaps isn't aware) of the fact that you do not learn to ride over night, particularly as stirrups weren't invented yet.<sup>30</sup> I think this Sophoclean play is significant for another reason: Antigone and Ismene are portrayed as brave and faithful companions, not of their husbands or fiancés, but of their father, a tendency prominent in Athenian drama from the 420s onwards.<sup>31</sup>

As regards Herodotus, he is probably wildly off the mark when he implies Sauromatian women did not spin or weave. True, he does not actually say so in so many words, but he has the Amazonian ancestors of the Sauromatians say (4, 114, 3) that they do not know how to do women's work, which to the Greeks was not cooking but spinning and weaving, and then goes on to say (4, 116, 2) that the Sauromatian women of his time still live like their ancestors. But unless I have missed some recent finding all Scythian and Sauromatian women's graves contain spindle-whorls, including the graves of archeresses.<sup>32</sup> Their meaning may

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<sup>29</sup> 337-356. Scholars agree that Sophocles is here following Herodotus; for more details see Wenskus 1997, p. 24-25.

<sup>30</sup> Note that the elite soldier of the Athenian upper class was not the rider but the hoplite, the heavily (and expensively) armed foot soldier.

<sup>31</sup> See Di Benedetto, 1987, p. 220-229.

<sup>32</sup> Mayor (2014, p. 65), mentions discoveries of spindle-whorls in men's graves as well but does not specify the sites. Unfortunately I did not have enough time to check the sources cited by Mayor, not even to the extent of ascertaining how many (if any) of them are original excavation reports. This brings me to another of my misgivings about her book: I think that one shouldn't hold forth on the Scythians the way Mayor does without at least a working knowledge of Russian or, for that matter, German. My own Russian is more than just a bit rusty and I do not want to indulge in speculation anyway, but I see no need to

be symbolic, but the explanation that, if those whorls are symbolic, chances are that they symbolize the production of textiles, seems to be the most probable one by far.

To sum up the first part of this article, while myths about Amazons have influenced the way Greeks perceived Sauromatian women and vice versa, it is misleading the public (which, alas, seems to ask for this kind of sensationalism) to clamour “The Greeks were right; Amazons did exist“, unless we use the term “Amazon“, not as the Greeks did, but in the very wide sense of “women who fight, at least occasionally“.<sup>33</sup> Those who do use “Amazons“ in the Greek sense but still say they existed are committing the systematic error called the identification game: the mounted Sauromatian archeresses are the closest thing we have to what the Greeks understood by “Amazons“, so they are what the Greeks actually meant (or at least had in mind) when they used the term “Amazons”. Herodotus commits the same type of error when he jumps to the conclusion that Amazons and Sauromatians must be related.

Now for the second part. Edith Hall has been quoted<sup>34</sup> as saying “Nobody brings ancient history and archaeology to life like Adrienne Mayor.” This highly subjective impression or something

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assume that the above-mentioned men buried with spindle-whorls used them in combination with flywheels to make fire. Why shouldn't they have used them for spinning as well as women did? After all, they were not Greeks.

<sup>33</sup> Mayor (2014) is not the only one to do so. Scythologist Renate Rolle (2011) goes even farther, alleging (p. 120) that “all of the legends about Amazons find their visible archaeological reflections within the grave goods.” For this overstatement she is criticized by Mayor p.20, and quite rightly too. If only Rolle had written “some” instead of “all”... well, pedants might object it should be the other way round, but we would have known what she meant.

<sup>34</sup> I found the quote in the 2015 catalogue of Princeton University Press, p.1, but not in Hall's review published in the New Statesman, 16 January 2015. For this review see Hall 2015.

similar is voiced by most of the reviewers of Mayor's "The Amazons" on amazon.com., but it is based on an illusion caused by several systematic errors, not the least important of which is story bias. What Mayor brings to life is not ancient history but her own thought constructs. This holds true for many historians, of course, but good historians are aware of the fact and try to avoid wishful thinking. Mayor doesn't try hard enough. Also, she doesn't even try to resist the temptation to speculate about the sex life of persons who actually lived or were at least supposed to have lived by some ancient authors. She even goes as far as writing a subchapter which definitely crosses the line to slash fiction.<sup>35</sup> I mean *A moth on the wall*. True, Mayor has, on the previous pages, admitted that even ancient historians seriously doubted the historicity of Alexander the Great's sexual encounter with Amazon queen Thalestris<sup>36</sup>, but her arguments against the skeptics are extremely weak or, rather, not valid. True, some of the details adduced by Curtius do reflect traditional practices,<sup>37</sup> but that goes for all historical novels, and even fantasy<sup>38</sup> and science fiction, yet still we would not accept even the best

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<sup>35</sup> P. 330-331. Slash fiction is fan fiction of an overtly erotic, sexual or even pornographic nature, usually written, or so I have been told, by (otherwise?) perfectly normal women. This kind of fiction, usually published on the Internet, sports titles like Kirk/Spock; pronounced "Kirk slash Spock".

<sup>36</sup> The skeptics are almost certainly right; see Wenskus 2000, p.68-69.

<sup>37</sup> P. 322.

<sup>38</sup> I think it is highly significant that in some bookshops fantasy and historical novels are actually put on the same shelf. As a matter of fact I encourage my students to read good fantasy rather than bad, i.e. most, historical novels. There is a somewhat bloodthirsty but very good *Warhammer* fantasy novel inspired by Herodotus' account of the Scythians, Dan Abnett's *Riders of the Dead* (2003); I managed to buttonhole the author during a fan convention held in Cologne in the summer of 2009 and can vouch for his sound knowledge of Herodotus' Scythian logoi. Since chaos gods and demons feature as prominently in this novel as *Warhammer* fans would expect, at least no reader will suppose the events related by Abnett actually happened.

historical fiction as historical sources for any other time than the authors'. Slash fiction should have no place in works which purport to be serious research. Not that I find the contents offensive per se, although I would not advise readers to follow Edith Hall's advice to: "read this wonderful book with your children and show them its pictures."<sup>39</sup> The reason for my misgivings is, rather, something which isn't Mayor's fault but rather a disturbing fact which affects human reasoning automatically: in the words of Daniel Kahnemann, "we pay more attention to the content of messages than to information about their reliability."<sup>40</sup> This holds true even when we are explicitly warned the information we are given is not reliable. Of course a certain degree of speculation is unavoidable in any kind of research, but it should not be allowed to run amuck lest it cause readers impressed by Mayor's vast (if sometimes superficial) erudition to think she may very well be right. The Chinese whispers effect will cause any speculation presented by a good and influential writer (like Herodotus) to be taken as an established fact, if not by everybody<sup>41</sup>.

Now consider the following paragraph from *Women warriors at the river of blood*:

Rorg turned his fierce eye upon her. M'nea felt her heart begin to quicken even as her hand went on her dagger. She had intended to plunge it into his throat, but something about him made her hesitate.

This isn't an excerpt from one of the (often fascinating) texts from Central Asia or the Caucasus region quoted by Mayor, and to give her credit I hadn't realized there were so many of them. This is a fictional text inserted into another fictional text: a

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<sup>39</sup> Hall 2015, p. 9 in the online edition. .

<sup>40</sup> Kahnemann 2012, p. 118; see also p.146-153.

<sup>41</sup> See Wenskus 2016.



Klingon romantic novel read by Starship Voyager's half-human, half-Klingon engineer, B'Elanna Torres, during the *Voyager*<sup>42</sup> Episode *Real Life* (III/22, first aired 23 april 1997), and somewhat shamedfacedly classified by her as "just escapist reading." B'Elanna knows what she is talking about. Such texts are all very well as light reading but they are not "real life"<sup>43</sup>, not even in the *Star Trek* Universe. B'Elanna may talk like one of those legendary warrior women when flirting ("I can't promise I won't put a dagger in your throat"), but Tom Paris, being well aware that B'Elanna knows how to use both traditional Klingon and high tech Star Fleet weapons but would rather avoid actually fighting to the death, accepts it as the joke it is meant to be. There are some female warriors on board of the Klingon Birds of Prey, but they constitute a minority, and the tales they tell about their exploits are expected to be wildly exaggerated, as are those of male Klingon warriors (*Voyager* VII/14, *Prophecy*, 7 february 2001). The authors of all the *Star Trek* spin offs make it abundantly clear that there is a difference between Klingon oral tradition and what really happened, and the courtship of Kahless the Great and the Lady Lukara is probably no exception: first they fight against overwhelming odds, then they "jump on each other like a pair of crazed voles." But when Worf (a male Klingon) and Jadzia Dax (a female Trill) reenact this courtship on the holodeck (*Deep Space Nine* V/3, *Looking for par'mach in all the wrong places*, 14 october 1996) they have to hobble to see the ship's doctor afterwards.<sup>44</sup> Nor do the Klingons practice gender equality.

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<sup>42</sup> *Voyager* is the third of the *Star Trek* spin offs.

<sup>43</sup> As is often the case with *Star Trek* episodes, the episode title applies not only to the main plot but also to the sub plot, in this case, the courtship of Tom and B'Elanna.

<sup>44</sup> True Klingons, being more robust than humans, go in for more robust love-making, but in the same episode only the Ferengi Quark has to see the good doctor afterwards, not his Klingon friend and ex-wife Grilka, and in *Prophecy* the Talaxian Neelix looks only slightly roughed up (and in excellent spirits)

In normal circumstances, a Klingon lady is not even allowed to be the head of her house (*Deep Space Nine* III/3, *The House of Quark*, 10 October 1994). According to a text regularly recited at Klingon weddings, the first female Klingon heart was created after the first male Klingon heart, and even if together they defeated and killed their gods (*Deep Space Nine* VI/7, *You are cordially invited*, 1 November 1997), this kind of fighting side by side doesn't really work in real life. When Worf and Dax, married by now, are sent on a mission to meet with a Cardassian double agent, it is like a second honeymoon, with Worf and Dax chatting and laughing as they trudge through the jungle, until Dax is badly wounded. At first they agree she should be left behind to die, but then Worf has a change of heart (*Change of Heart* is the title of this episode, *Deep Space Nine* VI/16, 4 March 1998) and goes back to save his wife, thus missing his rendezvous with his contact who is subsequently killed. If their mission had succeeded, millions of lives could have been saved. Captain Sisko, while admitting he would have done the same thing as Worf, decides not to send husbands and wives on the same mission anymore.

I do not know whether the authors of *Prophecy* knew the legend of Alexander and Thalestris, either directly or indirectly, but when Klingon commander Ch'rega witnesses (human) Harry Kim taking a firm stance, she is even more blunt than Thalestris is, and for rather different reasons: "You have a fiery spirit. You will make a worthy mate", she tells Kim. Unlike Thalestris, she doesn't seem to be bothered by the fact that Kim, like Alexander, doesn't have the physique of a great warrior, and unlike Thalestris she doesn't act for dynastic reasons. Add to this a) that she has never heard of him before while Alexander's renown was what had attracted Thalestris' attention in the first place and b) that Kim

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after his hot date with Klingon commander Ch'rega (although they managed to wreck the quarters of their unwilling host in the process).

is not interested at all and prefers to sacrifice his pride in order to divert Ch'rega's amorous attentions from himself to Neelix, and the differences between the two stories seem more significant than the similarities. It is probably safer to assume that *Prophecy* is a link in the tradition of stories about fierce and demanding Warrior women.

I also do not know whether Mayor has watched *Star Trek*<sup>45</sup>, but then there are other Warrior women in popular culture whose adventures she may have followed. There seems to be a certain demand for them. It is to this demand that Mayor caters, and so do the Star Trek spin offs, but unlike most authors of Warrior women stories including Mayor they use metaliterary techniques to deconstruct the very clichés those stories are made of. The traditional warrior women stories characterised by a mixture of sex and violence told in the Star Trek universe are thus shown to be fictional even within the Star Trek universe. Those women and their mates are important role models for the Klingons, whose culture is, not in the original series but in all the spin offs, consistently portrayed as fascinating, even admirable in many ways, but also destabilising. The Klingon empire is forever teetering on the brink of collapse. There are many types of female role models in the *Star Trek* spin offs, but none of them conform to the archetype of the female Klingon warrior. However one of the more interesting types of role model is the half Klingon<sup>46</sup> who is uncomfortable with the aggressive traits of her Klingon heritage at first but learns to accept them and make good use of them, to help those she has sworn to protect (including herself). I like to think that this is ultimately what Mayor and her many fans have in

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<sup>45</sup> She does use the expression “mind meld” on p. 171.

<sup>46</sup> Like B'Elanna but also like Worf's first love interest, K'ehleyn, one of the most engaging characters of *The Next Generation* (*The Emissary*, II/20, 29 June 1989).

mind as well. To put it in a nutshell, Mayor errs on the side of the angels also known as the Heavenly Hosts.

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