To Breast or Not to Breast: The Amazonian Pectoral Transformation

It is clear that in the Greek mindset the Amazons enjoyed a special place in the structure of Other. Throughout ancient art they are depicted as fierce warriors. Homer even grants Penthesilea and *aristeia* equal to minor Greek heroes. This special position of the Amazons was due largely to their efforts to distance themselves from the world of ordinary women and to transplant themselves into the men’s world. This study will focus on the Amazonian namesake, breast removal. The etymology of the word *ἀμαζών*, supposedly meaning “breast-less”, comes to us from the ancient Greeks themselves. The validity of this practice, and etymology, has been cast into doubt. In fact some doubt whether the Amazons were anything more than an ancient fiction. However, despite evidence to support these theories the Amazons certainly existed and their culture probably had some element of mammary mutilation.

The existence of the Amazons is almost conclusively proven by archaeological evidence. Excavations of grave complexes in the Black Sea region, the traditional home of the Amazons, have produced many females’ tombs which included the usual feminine accessories alongside arrows, shields, spears, and other battle equipment. In addition their presence in history and historiography, not only poetry and epic, validates the Amazonian existence. Evidence for the veracity of breast removal is scantier than for their historical reality. Accounts that a (partial) mastectomy was performed on the Persian queen, Atossa, show that breast removal was possible with ancient technology. While Herodotus neglects to mention any bust-less Amazons, he does describe them as land-dwellers and ignorant of the water. This takes them firmly out of the liquid world of women and puts them in the solid world of men, opening the door for physical modifications. Vase paintings do not show any Amazons explicitly missing their right breast, though most are at least partially concealed. A good example is the Penthesilea cup, which shows no clear chest contouring on either woman present. The new evidence which connects Amazons to the Phrygian cult of Cybele, who required all her male adherents to be castrated, introduces an unexplored possibility of religious mastectomy. The accumulation of this evidence suggests that the rumor of Amazonian breast removal had at least some grounding in reality.