

The Enemy of My Enemy is Me: Heroes, Otherness, and Identity in Painted Amazonomachies

Amazons have served as a favorite punching-bag for rhetoricians, politicians, and artisans through numerous periods of Greek history. However, lumping all instances of Amazon condemnation together as instances of archetypical clash-of civilization rhetoric misses key discrepancies in both their iconographic and historical context. No Amazons exist in a homogenized Panhellenic atmosphere, and when this does seem the case, it is imperative that we understand the specific cultural and historical context which bred such depictions, and what it can tell us about the specific ideas that produced that particular expression.

I argue that in Athenian vase-painting, the specific allegorical character of Amazons is less focused on how they themselves are portrayed, but what figures they are contrasted with inside the compositions of these vases. This is not to claim that the stylistic components of Amazons within vase-painting are unimportant, but rather that they are constantly working in tandem with other characters within Amazonomachy compositions, in order to communicate specific ideas about foreignness along with proper polis and citizen identity. Here I focus primarily on the presence of two figures, Herakles and Theseus, and how their juxtaposition with Amazons reflects the changing cultural attitudes concerning foreigners within Athenian black and red-figure vase-painting.

The Amazons as a concept functioned as more than another strange ethnic group to marvel at, but as an important part of the Greek social spectrum, both dictating what was and was not considered acceptable for Greek men and women (Hardwick,1990). Amazons provided a perfect foil to the Greeks as they more or less embodied everything the Greeks found distasteful. In short, at the root of this discomfort was that Amazons did everything men were expected to do (Kearns, 1998; Vlassopolous, 2013). In the patriarchal world of the polis, Amazons represented a

complete overturning of social order, and the potential crumbling of crucial male-dominance. The Greek world was predicated on the idea that certain contexts were expected to exist as fully male-dominated, most importantly, hunting, athletics, and warfare, things that were never done by women except for the notable example of the Amazons (McNiven, 2012). As all of these actions were considered crucial for the definition of the Greek male self, infringements on such acts represented potential for the dissolution of their dominance.

Of course, in order to remedy this social discomfort and firmly establish acceptable behavior, Amazons within Greek art are compulsively shown in defeat, just as all figures who breach the basic limits of any particular social standing, whether they be women fighting like men, giants trying to usurp the Olympians, or men trying to act as gods (Blundell, 1998). What was so effective about the narrative of the Amazons was unlike other mythical confrontations like the Titanomachy and the Gigantomachy, the Amazonomachy provides a role for both men and women, more firmly embedding it within the dynamics of daily life (Schefold, 1992). Through this closeness to everyday experience, the Amazons could call to mind a plethora of Greek others. Their foreign location, and rejection of comfortably Greek gender roles allowed Greeks to associate them with general ideas of barbarousness, while their female identity obviously placed them within the social class of womanhood (despite their unfeminine behavior). Thus, Amazons could readily play the part of whatever barbarian or moral aberration the Greeks liked, and in conjunction with Heraklean and Thesean Amazonomachies, vase painters could further exploit this cultural archetype.

Both Herakles and Theseus can embody different ideals depending on the historical and social contexts they are used in. When paired with an ideologically versatile symbol such as the Amazon, new meanings can be articulated based on their juxtaposition, as well as on particular

historical and cultural connotations working in concert with unique variations of Amazonomachy myths. In order to more fully understand the cultural messages being communicated through Amazon iconography in Greek vase-painting, we must not only consider how Amazons are depicted on their own, but also who they are fighting, and how that may change what these confrontations can mean for both the Amazon as a symbol, as well as for the identities and interests of the Athenian vase-painters and their audiences.

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