

## The 'Sissy' Problem: Post-Marathon Attitudes Towards Persians, Amazons, and Archers

During and after the Persian Wars from 490-479 BCE, the heavily clad hoplite reigned supreme over other kinds of soldiers, especially the lightly equipped archer. While the Persian Wars united the Greeks against a common enemy, the Greek experience with Persian archers facilitated a distinct shift in the Greek cultural value of archers. This perceptual change permeated contemporary literature pertaining to the Persian Wars and also manifested in Greek art, namely in Attic red-figure vessels portraying Amazons. Not only were Amazons depicted in Persian garb fighting hyper masculine Greek heroes like Achilles or Herakles, but they were also often shown sporting a bow or quiver, even if they were not specifically using them. In fact, there is a measurable change in both literature pertaining to archers and Amazons as well as artistic renderings of them.

After the Persian Wars, Amazons and Persians were conflated not simply because of their "otherness" to Greek men, but also due to their weapon of choice: the bow. While archery may not have been new to the Greeks, the overwhelming preference for hoplite warfare and phalanx formation precluded any acceptance of archery's strategic value. This may also bear a connection between Amazons and their distinct role as a representation of the nefarious Other. Stories of epic warrior women originate in the Middle East and Central and South Asia, areas considered to be the homeland of Amazons (Mayor 2014). So, while "Athens repeatedly used Amazons to serve its own ideology" (Fantham 1994), namely effeminizing and memorializing the Persians, they also represented a real threat to social infrastructure.

Amazons exist in a limbo of sexuality in the Greek male mind. They were equated with Persians partly to effeminize the former (Bonfante 1989) – often misinterpreted as an unambiguous feminization (Stewart 1995) – and also to emphasize that these were no ordinary women. Astutely written by Herodotus in an Amazon’s voice, they “know nothing of women’s work” (*Histories* 4.114, trans. De Sélincourt 2003). Indeed, Amazons are infamous for inverting the Greek social norms concerning women; by some accounts they murdered male offspring, thereby destroying the most essential aspect of Athenian democracy: its citizens (Fantham 1994). Elaine Fantham also remarks that this goes beyond a simple denial of an Athenian woman’s social function as a child-nurturer, but inverts it. Amazons also invert the Greek practice of marriage in that their husbands bring them a dowry before marriage, not vice versa. By being the dominant partners in these marriages, the Amazons take on a more traditionally masculine role. The Amazons are neither completely masculine nor completely feminine, and the fact that they are depicted as not just archers, but Persian archers, indicates this even more strongly. The Persians, too exist in this limbo of sexuality and gender, almost fluidly, as they were fearsome enemies of the Greeks who were effeminized to emphasize the Greeks’ victory over the Persians and therefore their dominant masculinity.

The evolution of the role of the Amazons in the Greek male psyche is rooted in their experience fighting Persian troops. Herodotus accounts for 48 distinct nationalities fighting on the Persian side, 28 of which are specifically mentioned as carrying bows, arrows, or quivers (*Hist.* 7.61-80, trans. De Sélincourt 2003). With a 58% majority, archers were sure to have played a key role in post-war trauma that Athenians specifically externalized onto their artwork through the Amazonomachy trope. Examining archers,

Amazons, and their respective roles in literature and iconography reveals that the shift in perception to regard archers as negative and un-masculine clashes with their earlier roles. Mortal archers discussed in the works of Homer, works which predate the Persian Wars, are depicted as masculine yet cowardly warriors compared to the likes of Diomedes and Hector. However in these scenarios Greek archers still participated effectively in war. Amazons were arguably more successful as killing machines yet nevertheless retained a fetishized place in the pantheon of Greek enemies, like the Persians. Upon their conflation with Persian male warriors, despite divergences in aspects such as gender and social function, their iconographic journeys converge on their weapon of choice: the bow and arrow.

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