

THE AMAZONS

As a rule, actualities do not beget myths, but the inexplicable of realities may trigger a whole string of mythical figures (like the phenomenon of the fading and re-birth of the vegetation, which created personages like Persephone, Attys . . . etc.). The mythological process in this case was, as we see, initiated by an actuality which was perplexing and thereupon explained with the help of some rather lofty imagination.

This sort of development was quite often sparked by reports from foreign lands made by travellers who saw extraordinary things which they did not understand and which they had first to explain to themselves in a somehow reasonable manner (like Herodotus IV.30, where snow is explained as being feathers . . . etc.) before they set out to explain to others their own misunderstood reconstruction of extraordinary apparitions—and this, probably by means of an in-exact vocabulary, and the exaggeration of the phenomenal, while adding here and there a touch to reinforce the credibility.

We have a few incidences of this sort: When the first riders or “Horsemen” were seen, coming from Asia, people believed that horse and rider were one unit, a special race, because the horse, as such, was not known, and people invented a special genealogy, explaining how and why those “Centaurs” were created and a whole series of adventures ascribed to them, generally depicting them as being aggressive, as taking the wine away from the population, getting drunk and as being after the local women . . . all of those features truly reflecting the habits of the Asiatic horsemen, so that we have here a clear case of a reality sparking or begetting a myth.

The same happened when the Spaniards on horseback invaded America at a time for which we have clear records. Again the natives thought them to be a special race of Centaurs and invented a myth around them, their divine and wonderful connections, so that we can, by this late and documented analogy, be reasonably sure that a similar process took place in a time for which we have no written records but only the end-product of this process in the form of mouth to mouth transmitted stories, recorded by the mythographers in a skilled and resplendent form.

Another case where a reality, superficially observed and misinterpreted, are the stories of the “Man in the Moon” which sparked a number of stories involving personages of partly celestial and partly earthly provenience. The actuality in this case were the spots in the moon, in which the fantasy believed to see a man, whereupon a saga was invented to explain why this man came there, which saga involved some mythological figures, known from other stories.

In Asia there are some other stories to explain in the changing “face” of the moon, its temporary vanishing and re-birth, where we too can see the observation of a reality, the moon-face, as the starting-point to create a saga in which eventually other mythological figures are involved.

The very learned Plinius, in the 37 books of the “Naturalis Historia” reports a great number of such mis-interpretations of realities, many of them branching over into the networks of mythology and spinning their yarns to involve well known figures. Most of those reports were based on stories brought home by travellers from foreign lands and freely connected to other phenomena . . . quite often from the East, considered to be the mystic region of marvels.

Having now established the fact that visual impressions of realities, which were, however, misinterpreted, sparked some mythical stories, we turn our attention to the case of the AMAZONS:

THE LOCATION

Herodotus in his book IV, paragraph 110, calls the Amazons OEORPATA meaning “Mankiller” – (OEOR being the Scythian word for “man” and PATA for “Kill”) – but before he goes into details he describes the districts of their activity which are all located on the South-West borders of Asia, just where the rich caravans from the East had to cross the dangerous mountains to the Mediterranean. Herodotus mentions in IV.103 that “plunder are the sources of this people’s livelihood”. More names of tribes and locations mentioned by Herodotus between IV.102 and IV.110 give us the picture of the caravans, coming regularly on the caravan-routes from India to Arabia, and being ambushed and plundered in what we may call the “Amazon District”. This could raise two suspicions: Either that the female “Man-killers” were the local plunderers, or else, that those “Mankillers” were members of the caravans.

We know from archaeological finds that the caravan routes were leading precisely through the districts which are described by Herodotus as the lands of the Amazons. Along those routes the caravans seem to have been “shedding” their wares—(as the archaeologists call it)—but why should they do that voluntarily in the wild and generally uninhabited mountains. It seems more probable that they were ambushed, plundered and robbed there. The fact that some of the merchandise from India, like golden trinkets, jars of spices and embroidery . . . as well as from the returntrip from the Mediterranean to India, like Alexandrine ware . . . were found also in Taxila and other cities around the Indo-Pakistan border lands, would indicate that the pirates sold their loot in cities, as they had no use for those precious things and art-objects themselves. However, Herodotus says that some of those mountain tribes “wear gold on their persons”—which is amazing as they had no agriculture or industry in those barren rocks and this very fact again points to the acquisition by pirating—and Herodotus says of the same people in IV.104: “They have their women in common, so that they be brothers” – which was the usual pattern of mountain bandits. Of some of them Herodotus writes in IV.106: “The Androphagi are the most savage, they have no notion of either law or justice. They have a language peculiar to themselves and eat human flesh.”

We see that the crossing of those districts was no easy matter for the caravans and we wonder what they did about it.

THE CARAVANS

In switching now over to the plight of the caravans and “dovetailing” the statements by Herodotus with later reports from the same regions, we may consider that things changed very little in those districts, so that those later conditions may, in many respects, very well throw a light on the customs of earlier times, showing how the caravans reacted to the menaces of the pirates.

We have several early reports to the effect that those caravans did not take women along, because of their possible pregnancies during those months-long arduous trips, but mainly because women could not defend the caravans, while fighting was necessary to beat back the bandits who wanted to plunder the rich convoys. As supplies of water and food were limited, they wanted to take only members of the caravans along who could do some fighting too. Therefore they took with them young and goodlooking boys, dressed as women, whom they used instead of women, but who could also fight, if necessary, or at least pitch in, when fighting was done.

Those or similar caravans existed even as late as the time of Sir Richard Burton, officer in the British colonial administration of India, around 1845. In making reference to the Afghans, whose language he could speak and who were the guides and “spearheads” of the caravans through the dangerous mountain passes, he writes:

“The Afghans are commercial travellers on a large scale and each caravan is accompanied by a number of boys and lads, almost in women’s attire, with Kohl’d eyes and rouged cheeks, long tresses and henna’d fingers and toes. They are called Kuch-i-safari, or ‘travelling wives’ and are the cause of perpetual mortification among the Persian women.”

The eyes of the boys were fringed with “Kohl”—(sticks of charcoal)—and hands and feet stained with Henna, because this was the typical makeup for girls who professionally live on their saleable charms. From other sources we learn that those male concubines had “smooth”—(depilated)—bodies, long curled hairdo, dripping of oil and perfume, big earrings of coins, and glittering jewelry all over their persons, enough to make them appear to be girls, on first sight. But despite their feminine attire, they delighted in using arms, especially bow and arrow, and to ride and race on horseback.

We can now understand the reports about fighting women, probably made by some scared bandits whose stories trickled through to the Mediterranean lands—maybe together with the stories about the incredible creatures who were said to defend the pepper trees.

Some bandits or tribesmen may have by chance had a glimpse of the bare chest, or part of it, of those lads, which was smooth and not of the female sort, which developed into the story that the Amazons had only one breast—(followed promptly by a semi-logical saga, explaining this phenomenon).

Some others may have reported that the Amazons sometimes consorted with men—(sparking again elaborate stories why and how that developed, see Herodotus IV.112)—all that based on the true observations of the fondling caresses, or more, of which those costumed lads were living.

The fact that the Amazons had a language of their own is also mentioned in mythological stories, the language may have been in fact Indian or even Chinese, if they were “Kuch-i-safari”.

The Amazons were often depicted in visual art, which is no proof of their actual existence, as we have many parallel and analogous cases where reports of travellers to foreign lands, faulty as they have been, were faithfully and to the letter illustrated by artists. (We disregard here the uniform representation of divinities, of obviously fictitious character.) As late as 150 A. D. quasi factual reports reached Rome—(by the grammarian Aulu-Gelle) and others that in India there were men with the head of a dog—(a misunderstood sculpture of a divinity, taken for a portrait)—and that the people there had enormous ears—(reported by a traveller who saw an Indian statuette with elongated ears, which is an Asiatic fashion, while the Indian people have in fact very small and neat ears)—however, a great many of those reported and misunderstood extraordinary creatures were faithfully illustrated in visual arts and shown, like the Amazons, not only in personal attitudes, but also as being involved with other mythical or semi-historical figures.

A question not answered by all the myth-tales involving the Amazons is: “Why did the Amazons attack? —For what did the “Mankillers” fight? ”—(if it were not to defend the caravans)—According to Herodotus, they held no specific territory and were not out for material gain. They appeared from somewhere and in the end vanished as mysteriously as they came in the mountains of Asia-Minor “and wear now the same costume as men.”

All that would defy any logic, even the logic of a myth . . . but it would fit perfectly well into their pattern if we assume that we deal here with the “Kuch-i-safari”. Even the very last remark of Herodotus to the effect that they later wore men’s clothes, then starts to make sense, or could be based on an actual observation.

As to the credibility of the Amazon-myth, which is a puzzle to the experts because of this most singular sociological phenomenon, the question of its probability may arise, based on analogies of any parallel cases. The questions are:

“Do we have any evidence of a female group of fighters anywhere? ” and

“Do we have any historic evidence of women fighting against men? ”

Concerning the first question we have an answer by Sir Richard Burton, who saw an exclusively female group of fighters, but unlike the Amazons, they were not autonomous, were no specific tribe, but were a sort of “reject” from harems. He found this “militia” near Fernando-Po in the services of the regional King of Dahome. Burton writes:

“I was looking forward with curiosity to see 5,000 adult African virgins. I found that most of them were women taken in adultery and given to the King as food for powder instead of being killed. They were mostly elderly and all of them hideous. The officers were decidedly chosen for the size of their bottoms. They carried drums, duck-guns, muskets and immense razor-like Knives and black horsetail headdresses. Instead of the supposed 5,000 only 2,500 were present, of which only 1,700 constituted the actual fighting force. All were

officially wives of the King, and those who were caught in adultery—(again)—were either killed together with their paramours, or sold into slavery. Nevertheless, so difficult is chastity in the tropics, that 150 of them were pregnant. They are bound, like the female priests of Grewhe, under penalty of death, to chastity and celibacy, and this naturally communicates a certain amount of ferocity to their minds—“horrors” are, with the eunuch, their succedatum for love.”

Concerning the second question of historic evidence of women fighting against men, we may think of the only major battle led by a woman against men, which was lost by the British Queen Budicea against the Roman invasion, whereupon she committed suicide. According to the “Annals” XIV.35 to 37 by Tacitus, there fell 8,000 Britons with the loss of only 400 Romans.

CONCLUSION

All inquiries as to the probability of real Amazons, based on sociologic or historic parallels seem to end negative. However, it may be of historic significance that the stories of the Amazons arose at a time when the Asia trade was fairly new, that is, at the time of Homer, not before and in no other country, so that they seem to be based on a local experience. From the mythological point of view, it is remarkable that the Amazons were not products of the early fears and hopes of humanity, nor were they personifications of abstractions, nor did they hold the patronate over any special categories—they were, in short, no truly mythological figures . . . but they fit in all respects into the class of misinterpreted apparitions, the group of the many misunderstood realities, which eventually became involved with mythological figures. More specifically: Many hints point to the possibility that the fighting “Kuch-i-safari” fleetingly observed while defending their caravans against pirates, were thought by those scared plunderers to be young women, because of their dresses, whereupon those “eyewitnesses” reported back to their tribes the beautiful sight they had seen, out of which developed the myth of the Amazons. A myth which was so beautifully embroidered by the great story-tellers of the time, and so nobly illustrated by the artists, that nobody wanted to miss it anymore. Like the craters of the moon, which sparked age-old and detailed stories of the man there, it seems possible that the turbulent “Kuch-i-safari” gave us, through a misunderstanding and its steady embellishments, those wonderfully mysterious figures.

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Burton's drawing of an Amazon officer, from *Mission to Gelele, King of Dahome*, 1864.