

# SECTION ONE

# THE AMAZONS OF

# AFRICA

The earliest nation of Amazons were those whom ancient writers said inhabited the coast of Libya, the ancient name for Africa. According to Diodorus of Sicily, a Greek historian who traveled in Egypt in either the 1st or 2nd century B.C., this nation was at its peak “many generations before the Trojan War,” which is generally thought by modern archaeologists to have occurred around 1200 B.C.

Diodorus, who drew from sources dating back as far as the 5th century B.C., describes the African Amazons in Book III of his *Library of History*. He quotes as his source an earlier historian, Dionysius, who earned the nickname Skytobrachion (“of the leathern arm”) for his copious writings, and who lived in Alexandria in the middle of the 2nd century B.C. Diodorus writes:

“... there was once in the western parts of Libya, on the bounds of the inhabited world, a race which was ruled by women and followed a manner of life unlike that which prevails among us. For it was the custom among them that the women should practice the arts of war and be required to serve in the army for a fixed period, during which time they maintained their virginity; then, when the years of their service in the field had expired, they went in to the men for the procreation of children, but they kept in their hands the administration of the magistracies and of all the affairs of state.

“The men, however, like our married women, spent their days about the house, carrying out the orders which were given them by their wives; and they took no part in military campaigns or in the exercise of free citizenship in the affairs of the community by virtue of which they might become presumptuous and rise up against the women.

“When their children were born the babies were turned over to the men, who brought them up on milk and such cooked foods as were appropriate to the age of the infants; and if it happened that a girl was born, its breasts were seared that they might not develop at the

time of maturity; for they thought that the breasts, as they stood out from the body, were no small hindrance in warfare; and in fact it is because they have been deprived of their breasts that they are called by the Greeks ‘Amazons.’<sup>1</sup>

“As mythology relates, their home was on an island which, because it was in the west, was called Hesperia,<sup>2</sup> and it lay in the marsh Tritonis.<sup>3</sup> This marsh was near the ocean which surrounds the earth<sup>4</sup> and received its name from a certain river Triton which emptied into it; and this marsh was also near Ethiopia and that mountain by the shore of the ocean which is the highest of those in the vicinity and impinges upon the ocean and is called by the Greeks Atlas.<sup>5</sup>

“The island mentioned above was of great size and full of fruit-bearing trees of every kind, from which the natives secured their food. It contained also a multitude of flocks and herds, namely, of goats and sheep, from which the possessors received milk and meat for their sustenance; but grain the nation used not at all because the use of this fruit of the earth had not yet been discovered among them.

“The Amazons ... being a race superior in valor and eager for war, first of all subdued all the cities on the island except the one called Mene,<sup>6</sup> which was considered to be sacred and was inhabited by Ethiopian Ichthyophagi, and was also a subject of great eruptions of fire and possessed a multitude of the precious stones which the Greeks call anthrax, sardion, and smaragdos<sup>7</sup> and after this they subdued many of the neighboring Libyans and nomad tribes, and founded within the marsh Tritonis a great city which they named Cherronesus after its shape.<sup>8</sup>

“Setting out from the city of Cherronesus ... the Amazons embarked upon great ventures, a longing having come over them to invade many parts of the inhabited world. The first people against whom they advanced ... was the

Atlantians, the most civilized men among the inhabitants of those regions, who dwelt in a prosperous country and possessed great cities.<sup>9</sup>

“Now the queen of the Amazons, Myrina, collected ... an army of thirty thousand foot soldiers and three thousand cavalry, since they favored to an unusual degree the use of cavalry in their wars. For protective devices they used the skins of large snakes,<sup>10</sup> since Libya contains such animals of incredible size, and for offensive weapons, swords and lances; they also used bows and arrows, with which they struck not only when facing the enemy but also when in flight, by shooting backwards at their pursuers with good effect.

“Upon entering the land of the Atlantians they defeated in a pitched battle the inhabitants of the city of Cerne ... and making their way inside the walls along with the fleeing enemy, they got the city into their hands; and desiring to strike terror into the neighboring peoples they treated the captives savagely, put to the sword the men from the youth upward, led into slavery the children and women, and razed the city.

“But when the terrible fate of the inhabitants of Cerne became known among their fellow tribesmen ... the Atlantians, struck with terror, surrendered their cities on terms of capitulation and announced that they would do whatever should be commanded them, and that the queen Myrina, bearing herself honorably towards the Atlantians, both established friendship with them and founded a city to bear her name in place of the city which had been razed; and in it she settled both the captives and any native who so desired.

“Whereupon the Atlantians presented her with magnificent presents and by public decree voted to her notable honors, and she in return accepted their courtesy and in addition promised that she would show kindness to their nation. And since the natives were often being warred upon by the Gorgons ... a folk which resided upon their borders, and in general had that people lying in wait to injure them, Myrina... was asked by the Atlantians to invade the [Gorgons'] land...

“But when the Gorgons drew up their forces to resist them a mighty battle took place in which the Amazons, gaining the upper hand, slew great numbers of their opponents and took no fewer than three thousand prisoners; and since the rest had fled for refuge into a certain wooded region, Myrina undertook to set fire to the timber, being eager to destroy the race utterly, but when she found that she was unable to succeed in her attempt she retired to the borders of her country.

“Now as the Amazons ... relaxed their watch during the night because of their success, the captive women, falling upon them and drawing the swords of those who thought they were conquerors, slew many of them; in the end, however, the multitude poured in about them from every side and the prisoners fighting bravely were butchered one and all.

“Myrina accorded a funeral to her fallen comrades on three pyres and raised up three great heaps of earth as tombs, which are called to this day ‘Amazon mounds.’

“But the Gorgons, grown strong again in later days, were subdued a second time by Perseus<sup>11</sup>, the son of Zeus, when Medusa was queen over them; and in the end both they and the race of the Amazons were entirely destroyed by Heracles when he visited the regions to the west and set up his pillars in Libya ...<sup>12</sup>

“The story is also told that the marsh Tritonis disappeared from sight in the course of an earthquake, when those parts of it which lay towards the ocean were torn asunder.

“As for Myrina ... she visited the larger part of Libya, and passing over into Egypt she struck a treaty of friendship with Horus,<sup>13</sup> the son of Isis,<sup>14</sup> who was king of Egypt at that time, and then, after making war to the end upon the Arabians and slaying many of them, she subdued Syria; but when the Cilicians<sup>15</sup> came out with presents to meet her and agreed to obey her commands, she left those free who yielded to her of their free will and for this reason these are called to this day the ‘Free Cilicians.’

“She also conquered in war the races in

the region of the Taurus, peoples of outstanding courage, and descended through Greater Phrygia to the [Aegean] sea; then she won over the land lying along the coast and fixed the bounds of her campaign at the Caicus River.<sup>16</sup>

“And selecting in the territory which she had won by arms sites well suited for the founding of cities, she built a considerable number of them and founded one which bore her own name,<sup>17</sup> but the others she named after the women who held the most important commands, such as Cyme, Pitana,<sup>18</sup> and Priene.<sup>19</sup>

“These, then, are the cities she settled along the sea, but others, and a larger number, she planted in the regions stretching towards the interior. She seized also some of the islands, and Lesbos in particular, on which she founded the city of Mitylene, which was named after her sister who took part in the campaign.<sup>20</sup>

“After that, while subduing some of the rest of the islands, she was caught in a storm, and after she had offered up prayers for her safety to the Mother of the Gods<sup>21</sup> she was carried to one of the uninhabited islands; this island, in obedience to a vision which [Myrina] beheld in her dreams, she made sacred to this goddess, and set up altars there and offered magnificent sacrifices. She also gave it the name of Samothrace, which means, when translated into Greek, ‘sacred island,’ although some historians say that it was formerly called Samos and was given the name of Samothrace by Thracians who at one time dwelt upon it...

“In these times ... Mopsus the Thracian, who had been exiled by Lycurgus, the king of the Thracians,<sup>22</sup> invaded the land of the Amazons with an army composed of fellow-exiles, and with Mopsus on the campaign also was Sipylus the Scythian,<sup>23</sup> who had likewise been exiled from that part of Scythia which borders upon Thrace.

“There was a pitched battle, Sipylus and Mopsus gained the upper hand, and Myrina, the queen of the Amazons, and the larger part

of the rest of her army were slain.

“In the course of the years, as the Thracians continued to be victorious in their battles, the surviving Amazons finally withdrew again into Libya. And such was the end, as the myth relates, of the campaign which the Amazons of Libya made.”

Strabo, a geographer from the Pontus area (northern Turkey) who lived from 63 B.C. to about A.D. 21 or 24, confirms that cities along the Aegean coast of modern Turkey were named for Amazon heroes.

He writes, “... there are certain cities, it is said, which got their names from the Amazons, I mean Ephesus Smyrna, Cyme and Myrina.”<sup>24</sup> In a later passage, he adds, “... the Ephesians were fellow inhabitants of the Myrnaeans in ancient times, when Ephesus was also called Smyrna.” The city was named, he adds, after an Amazon. “Smyrna was an Amazon who took possession of Ephesus; and hence the name both of the inhabitants and of the city ...”

Strabo cites one ancient author, Ephorus, as locating the homeland of the Amazons who fought in the Trojan War as lying along the Aegean coast of modern Turkey, in the areas that Strabo knew as Mysia, Caria and Lydia, near the city of Cyme. “And this opinion might perhaps not be unreasonable, for he may mean the country which was later settled by the Aeolians and the Ionians, but earlier by the Amazons.”

Pomponius Mela, a Roman geographer of the 1st century A.D., lists a different founder: “The first city they call Myrina, after the name of Myrinus, the founder thereof.” But he agrees that the city Cyme was named after an Amazon. “Cyme, a captain of the Amazons, [drove] away the inhabitants that dwelt before at Cyme, [and] named it so, after her own name.”

The modern writer Florence Mary Bennett says that there were three towns named Myrina – one in Aeolis and two others in Asia Minor, one on the isle of Lemnos. Citing the German author O. Klugmann, she adds another city to the list of towns named after Amazons: Paphos.<sup>25</sup> She also mentions the isle of Patmos (located just to the southwest of Samos), which had a place on it called the Amazonium.

She adds: “Several cities of Asia Minor boasted that they were founded by the Amazons. Consistent

with these claims is the fact that, in this neighborhood, the figure or head of an Amazon was in vogue as a coin type, especially coins of Smyrna. It is to be noted that such devices are very rarely found on coins elsewhere.” (Her source is F. Imhoof-Blumer’s article “Amazons on Greek Coins in Nomisma, Vol. 2,” written in 1909.)

Helen Diner lists other cities said to have been founded by Amazons: Gryne, and Magnesia.<sup>26</sup>

## MYRINA’S TOMB

Strabo also gives a location for the tomb of Myrina, which he locates near the ancient city of Troy.

“And in the Trojan plain there is a hill ‘which by men is called Bateia, but the immortals the tomb of the much-bounding Myrina,’ who, historians say, was one of the Amazons, inferring this from the epithet ‘much-bounding,’ for they say that horses are called ‘well-bounding’ because of their speed; and that Myrina, therefore, was called ‘much-bounding’ because of the speed with which she drove her chariot. Myrina, therefore, is named after this Amazon.”

Heinrich Schliemann, a German archaeologist who excavated the ancient city of Troy in the 1870s, commented on the naming of the mound which was said to contain Myrina’s tomb in his book *Ilios: The City and Country of the Trojans*.

“Professor Sayce tells me that he fancies Myrina to be identical with the Amazon Smyrna, that is a name of [the goddess] Artemis/Cybele, the Amazons having been in the first instance the priestesses of this Asiatic goddess.

“Myrina was the name of a town in Lemnos, as well as of another on the coast of Mysia forty stadia to the south of Grynion, and Smyrna or Samorna was an old appellation of Ephesus, whose foundation was ascribed to the Amazons.

“... In [the *Iliad*], men are said to term Bateia what the gods call the tomb of the Amazon Myrina, whose name reappears in those of Smyrna and the Lemnian and Aeolic

Myrina. Bateia may be ‘the brambly’ [in Greek], a good designation for a tumulus which is still covered with bushes.”

Schliemann was referring to a passage found in Book II of the *Iliad*, the story of the Trojan War that was set down by the Greek poet Homer around 700 B.C. The tomb of the Amazon queen is mentioned in a passage describing how the Trojan forces are to be deployed. “Outside of the town and some way off in the plain there is a high mound with open ground on every side, which men call Thorn Hill, but the immortals know as the tomb of dancing Myrina.”

During his excavations at Troy, Schliemann excavated sixteen of the burial mounds that surrounded the city. According to C. Schuchhardt, author of a book on Schliemann’s excavations, “most of them have yielded nothing but potsherds.”

The name given to Myrina’s tomb, Bateia, is similar to that of a Trojan princess: Bateia, daughter of Teucer, the first Trojan king. She married Dardanus, an immigrant from Samothrace, and her grandson Troas gave his name to the city, while a town near Troy was named after Bateia. According to genealogies, Bateia lived five generations prior to the Trojan War; her great-great-great-grandson Podarces (Priam) ruled Troy during the war.

It is possible that the ancient writers blended the legends of this early Trojan queen with that of the leader of the African Amazons, mistaking Bateia’s tomb for that of Myrina.

## THE AMAZON HOMELAND

The exact location of Cherronesus, the Amazon city said to have been located on the island Hesperia in the Tritonis marsh, is not known. But several clues point to its general location, somewhere along the western half of the north African coast.

The Greek historian Herodotus, who wrote in the 5th century B.C., mentions it in a description of the tribes that lived along the southern coast of the Mediterranean. Working westward from the Greek colony of Cyrene, he lists the Bacales (whose territory touches the coast near the city of Tauchira), the Auschisae (whose territory touches the coast near the city of Euesperides<sup>27</sup>), the Nasamones (who journeyed inland to a city called Augila that was 20 days west of

Egyptian Thebes), the Macae (whose territory includes the river Cinyps, which flows into the Mediterranean from a hill known as Hill of the Graces, about twenty-five miles inland), and the Gindanes. Within the territory of the latter people, on a headland that “runs out into the sea” lived the Lotophagi (lotus eaters).

The next two tribes, the Machlyes and the Auses, had the Triton River as their boundary between their two territories. The river, Herodotus notes, “flows into the great lagoon of Tritonis. In the lagoon there is an island named Phla ...”

The descriptions of the religious festivals held by these two tribes hold echoes of the ancient women warriors said to have once occupied the same area.

“They hold an annual festival in honor of [the goddess] Athena, at which the girls divide themselves into two groups and fight each other with stones and sticks; they say this rite has come down to them from time immemorial, and by its performance they pay honor to their native deity – which is the same as our Greek Athena.

“If any girl, during the course of the battle, is fatally injured and dies, they say it is a proof that she is no maiden.

“Before setting them to fight, they pick out the best looking girl and dress her up publicly in a full suit of Greek armor and a Corinthian helmet; then they put her in a chariot and drive her round the lagoon. How they dressed these girls before there were Greeks settled in the neighborhood, I cannot say; presumably the armor they used was Egyptian ...

“The women of the tribe are common property; there are no married couples living together, and intercourse is casual – like that of animals. When a child is fully grown, the men hold a meeting, and it is considered to belong to the one it most closely resembles.”

Herodotus wrote with a misogynist perspective typical of his time period. Rather than being “common property” of the men, the women of these tribes might instead be said to be free to choose their own mates, unhindered by the convention of marriage, which often implied male ownership or guardianship.

The Machlyes, Herodotus writes, make use of the lotus, a “fruit about as big as a mastic-berry, and as sweet as a date.” They wear their hair “on the back of their heads,” as opposed to the Auses, who wear it on the front.

Another echo of women warriors can be found in Herodotus’ description of the Maxyes, a tribe living west of the Triton River. “Amongst this people the drivers of the war chariots are the women.”

All of the tribes between Egypt and Lake Tritonis were said to be nomadic peoples who lived on meat and milk. Herodotus notes that they sacrificed by cutting off the sacrificial animal’s ear, throwing it over the house, then wringing the animal’s neck.

“They sacrifice to the sun and moon, the worship of which is common to all the Libyans, though those who live round Lake Tritonis sacrifice chiefly to Athena, and after her, to Triton and Poseidon.

“It is evident, I think, that the Greeks took the ‘aegis’<sup>28</sup> with which they adorn statues of Athena from the dress of the Libyan women; for except that the latter is of leather and has fringes of leather thongs instead of snakes,<sup>29</sup> there is no other point of difference.

“Moreover, the word ‘aegis’ itself shows that the dress represented in statues of Athena is derived from Libya; for Libyan women wear goatskins with the hair stripped off, dyed red and fringed at the edges, and it was from these skins that we took our word ‘aegis.’”

Herodotus uses the Triton River as a dividing point that separates nomads in the east from agricultural people in the west. The geography also differs:

“The country round here [west of the Triton], and the rest of Libya to the westward, has more forest and a greater number of wild animals than the region which the nomads occupy. The latter – that is, eastern Libya – is low lying and sandy as far as the river Triton, whereas the agricultural region to the west is very hilly, and abounds with forest and animal life.”

Geographical information about the “Tritonian

lagoon” is recorded by Apollonius of Rhodes, a poet of the Egyptian city of Alexandria who wrote in the middle of the 3rd century B.C. He mentions the lagoon in a passage of his tale of the Argonauts, a band of Achaean adventurers who were blown off course to the shores of Libya. Trapped in the shallows of the lagoon and unable to find a navigable outlet, they are given directions by the god Triton.

“Triton, stretching out his hand, pointed to the distant sea and the deep mouth of the lagoon. At the same time he explained: ‘That is the outlet to the sea; the smooth, dark water marks the deepest spot. But on either side of it are beaches where the rollers break – you can see the foam from here – and the fairway in between them is a narrow one.

“‘The misty sea beyond it stretches from here to the sacred land of Pelops,<sup>30</sup> on the other side of Crete. Once you are out in the open, keep the land on your right and hug the coast as long as it runs north. But when it trends towards you and then falls away, you may safely leave it at the point where it projects and sail straight on.’”<sup>31</sup>

Apollonius then describes the departure of the Argonauts:

“At dawn they spread the sail and ran before the west wind, always keeping the desert on their right. The next morning they sighted the headland, and at the same time could see a corner of the sea that lay beyond the jutting cape.

“Here the west wind dropped and a breeze sprang up from the south... but when the sun sank ... the wind failed them. In the darkness of the night they furled the sail, lowered the tall mast, and sat down to their polished pinewood oars. They rowed hard for the rest of that night, all through the day and through the night that followed it; and they were still far from land when the high rocks of Carpathus saluted them. From that point they were to cross to Crete...”

According to legends recorded by Apollonius of

Rhodes, one of the landmarks near the Tritonian lagoon was a rock with water gushing from a cleft in it. The water was said to have been summoned by Heracles, who kicked the base of the rock.

The Amazons of Africa are referred to by the Greek playwright Aeschylus (525-456 B.C.). In *The Suppliant Maidens*, a king compares the women of Argos to the Amazons.

“... ye are rather more like to women of Libya and in no wise to those native to our land. The Nile, too, might foster such a stock, and like unto yours is the Cyprian impress stamped upon female forms by male artificers.

“And of such aspect, I have heard, are nomad women, who, pillion-borne, ride on steed-like camels, women dwelling in a land neighboring the Aethiopians. And had ye been armed with the bow, assuredly I had guessed ye to be the matless, flesh-devouring Amazons.”

## AMAZON CUSTOMS

The Amazons of Africa are also mentioned by the Greek historian and philosophical essayist Xenophon of Athens, who was born about 430 B.C. In a treatise on the management of the household, he records their customs:

“They say that in the western parts of Libya, on the borders of the known world, was a nation ruled by women which pursued a way of life not like our own. It was the custom for women to toil in war and to be obligated for an enlistment in the army. During this period they remained virgins; after their years of service they approached men for the procreation of children.

“The magistracies and affairs of state were administered by women. The men, like our married women, spent their time in the house tending to the orders of their wives. They had no share in the army or magistracies nor any say in public affairs from which they might become presumptuous and attack the women.

“When babies were born, they handed

them over to the men, who fed them with milk and other boiled foods suitable to the ages of infants.

“...the Amazons do their several tasks by themselves, the plowing, planting, pasturing of cattle, and in particular, the raising of horses. The bravest make much of hunting from horseback and of training for war.”

## **AMAZONS vs. DIONYSUS**

The Amazons of Africa make an appearance in the legends of Dionysus, an early Libyan hero with the same name as the Greek god of wine.<sup>32</sup> According to Diodorus of Sicily, the Amazons joined in his battle against the Titans, who were children of Uranus. The Titans, led by Cronus, had beaten Dionysus' father Ammon in battle and caused him to flee to Crete. They then set out against Dionysus, who lived in Nysa<sup>33</sup>.

“Dionysus ... gathered soldiers from Nysa ... and to these he added from neighboring peoples both the Libyans and the Amazons, [who] ... were distinguished for their courage and first of all campaigned beyond the borders of their country and subdued with arms a large part of the inhabited world.

“These women, they say, were urged on to the alliance especially by [the goddess] Athena, because their zeal for their ideal of life was like her own, seeing that the Amazons clung tenaciously to manly courage and virginity.

“The force was divided into two parts, the men having Dionysus as their general and the women being under the command of Athena, and coming with their army upon the Titans they joined battle.

Dionysus' forces won the battle, and Cronus fled back to the kingdom he had stolen from Ammon. To carry the attack to them, Dionysus marched through “a great extent of waterless land, no small portion of which was desert” and encamped near the Libyan city of Zabirna. He then marched on to defeat Cronus in a battle before the walls of the “city of the Ammonians.” He later attacked Egypt, and India. In a final battle on Crete, Dionysus and Athena kill the last of the Titans.

Although the Amazons are listed as allies of Dionysus by Diodorus, other ancient writers insist that they were enemies.

Plutarch, a Greek historian (A.D. 46-120), mentions a battle between the Amazons and Dionysus in his book *The Greek Questions*. In it, he records the origin of the name Panhaema (“All Blood”) on the island of Samos.

“... the Amazons sailed from the country of the Ephesians across to Samos when they were endeavoring to escape from Dionysus. But he built boats and crossed over an, joining battle, slew many of them near this place, which the spectators in amazement called Panhaema because of the vast quantity of blood shed there.”

Were the Amazons who marched with Dionysus' army under Athena the same as those who followed the Amazon queen Myrina? Both groups originated in the same place (Libya) and had a connection with the island of Samos. Myrina fought forces that had been exiled by the Thracian king Lycurgus, while Athena's ally Dionysus was driven away by the same king. (Did Dionysus ally himself with the Thracian exile Mopsus who attacked Myrina?)

It is impossible to say whether the two legends of the wars fought by the Amazons of Africa recount a single event, or two separate campaigns under two different Amazon leaders.

The confusion becomes even greater after the legends pass through the hands of the Roman playwright Seneca (4 B.C. - 65 A.D.). He writes that Bacchus (the Roman name for Dionysus) “has wrested their arms from the warrior maidens [the Amazons]; with downcast face they fell to earth, those Thermodontian hordes, gave up at length their light arrows, and became maenads” (female worshippers of the god Dionysus).

Here, Seneca is confusing the African Amazons with a second race of warrior women, the Amazons of Themiscyra, which is located on the southern coast of the Black Sea.

According to Pausanias, a Greek historian of the 2nd century A.D., women were among Dionysus' forces when he attacked Perseus, king of the Achaean cities of Mycenae and Tiryns. Pausanias records the

legend in his description of the monuments and shrines of the Greek city of Argos. One of these is “the grave of the island women of the Aegean who went on campaign with Dionysus and died in battle against Perseus and the Argives. They call them the sea women.”

Another memorial “is called the memorial of Choreia the maenad: they say she and other women came to Argos in Dionysus’ troops, and when Perseus won the battle he murdered most of the women: the rest were buried together but since this one had a special position they made her a private memorial.”

But Peter Levi, who translated Pausanias, says the ancient authors “mixed up” two stories – one of a battle of Dionysus versus Perseus, and the other of Dionysus driving the women of Argos mad to punish the city. So this last story may have no Amazon connection at all.

## AMAZONS AT EPHEBUS

Pausanias records that the Amazons “fled ... from Dionysus” and “threw themselves on [the] mercy” of the goddess Artemis at Ephesus, a city on the Aegean coast of modern Turkey.

Other ancient writers ascribe the founding at Artemis’ worship at Ephesus to the Amazons. One of them is the Greek poet Callimachus of Cyrene, who wrote his *Hymn to Artemis* around 250 B.C.

“For thee, too, the Amazons, whose mind is set on war, in Ephesus beside the sea established an image beneath an oak trunk, and [the Amazon queen] Hippo<sup>34</sup> performed a holy rite for thee, and they themselves, O Upis Queen, around the image danced a war dance – first in shields and armor, and again in a circle arraying a spacious choir. And the loud pipes thereto piped shrill accompaniment, that they might foot the dance together ... And they with their feet beat loudly and therewith their quivers rattled. And afterwards around that image was raised a shrine of broad foundations.”

Later in the hymn, Callimachus offers a warning: “Nor let any shun the yearly dance; for not tearless to Hippo was her refusal to dance around the altar.” This may be a reference to the fact that the Amazons who had invaded this area were later defeated.

The Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus (A.D. 55-120) mentions the Amazons while giving a history of Ephesus. In it, he cites a tradition that says the goddess Leto gave birth to Artemis and her twin brother Apollo in a grove named Ortygia beside the river Cenchrius. Here, he adds, the fertility god “Father Liber, victor in the war, had pardoned the suppliant Amazons who had seated themselves at the altar.”

(John Jackson, who translated Tacitus, says that Ortygia was a poetical name for Delos.)

Pomponius Mela also mentions the Amazon connection with Ephesus. “There is Ephesus and the most famous temple of Diana [Artemis], which the Amazons are reported to have consecrated when they held the sovereignty of Asia.”

The Greek historian Pausanias, in noting the popularity of the goddess Artemis, wrote, “All cities worship Artemis of Ephesus, and individuals hold her in honor above all the gods. The reason, in my view, is the renown of the Amazons, who traditionally dedicated the image, also the extreme antiquity of this sanctuary.”

But he disputes the tradition that the sanctuary was founded by Amazons.

“Pindar ... did not learn everything about the goddess, for he says that this sanctuary was founded by the Amazons during their campaign against Athens and Theseus.

“It is a fact that the women from the Thermodon, as they knew the sanctuary from of old, sacrificed to the Ephesian goddess both on this occasion and when they had fled from Heracles – some of them earlier still, when they had fled from Dionysus, having come to the sanctuary as suppliants.

“However, it was not by the Amazons that the sanctuary was founded, but by Coresus, an aboriginal [pre-Ionian], and Ephesus, who is thought to have been a son of the river Cayster, and from Ephesus the city received its name.

“The inhabitants of the land were partly Leleges, a branch of the Carians, but the greater number were Lydians. In addition there were others who dwelt around the sanctuary for the sake of its protection, and these included some women of the race of the Amazons.”

In the above passage, Pausanias is confusing the Amazons of Africa (who fled from Dionysus, and possibly from the Egyptian Heracles) and the Amazons who lived near the Thermodon River, located along the Black Sea coast of modern Turkey. The former group seems to have fled to Ephesus and come to the sanctuary of Artemis as suppliants, after being defeated by Dionysus. The latter group either became associated with Ephesus when legends of the two tribes of Amazons were confused, or perhaps also worshipped and/or dedicated a shrine there.

Just fifty kilometers southeast of Ephesus, a city named Amyzon was inhabited in Hellenistic times. Amyzon is referred to as a “sanctuary” by Henri Metzger in his book *The Ancient Civilization of Anatolia II*.

The Classical temple of Artemis at Ephesus was first excavated in the 1860s. Its earliest level is thought to date to about 600-590 B.C. and was littered with the bones of small animals and birds that were probably offered in sacrifice to the goddess.

According to Pliny the Elder, a Roman historian who wrote in the 1st century A.D., the temple had been built on marshy ground and was bathed by two rivers. The modern writer George Thomson adds that the Ephesian cult probably originated around a wooden image of the goddess Leto, which hung in the swamp from the sacred tree under which she was said to have given birth to Artemis and Apollo. The earliest “temple” here would have resembled the images found on bronze age Minoan rings – a simple altar beside a tree. If it was the African Amazons who founded the worship of Artemis at Ephesus, they would have danced around a shrine of this sort.

The annual festival to Artemis referred to by Callimachus took place in the spring in Classical times, and lasted one month, opening with public sacrifices and dances, and closing with athletic games.

## THE GODDESS ARTEMIS

Artemis, conceived of by the Greeks as a “virgin” (unmarried) goddess of the hunt, seems a natural to connect to the Amazons. She was a Greek goddess who evolved from Potnia Theron, queen of the wild beasts, a goddess who dates back to the Minoan period (pre-1400 B.C.). This goddess may have been imported to Crete from Asia Minor.

Artemis was the daughter of Leto, and twin sister of Apollo, who shared many of her attributes, including the use of the bow. As well as being the mistress of wild things, Artemis was the protector of youth. When women died a swift and painless death, they were said to have been killed by one of the goddess’ silver arrows.

In the Classical period, Artemis gained another epithet: moon goddess. This was probably due to the fact that Artemis was recognized as a protector of women in labor – and that the moon was connected with childbirth. (Newborn infants were taken outside their homes and “shown to the moon.”)

Macrobius writes that, “women suffering from certain diseases are described as ‘smitten by the moon’ and ‘smitten by Artemis.’”

Guy Cadogan Rothery notes a possible connection between the goddess and the Amazons. “In art we find Amazons wearing the crescent moon on their heads ... while their shields were either crescent-shaped or round. These, with their spears and bows and arrows, are the emblems of the moon huntress goddess, both in the guise of savage Astarte and of her Hellenised, humanized counterpart Artemis.”

In art, Artemis is shown with lions, deer or birds accompanying her. As the “virgin huntress” (a title that originated in the Classical period) she roams the countryside carrying a bow and arrow, accompanied by her “nymphs” or followers.

The Homeric Hymn to Artemis describes her as follows: “Artemis of the golden arrows, chaste virgin of the noisy hunt, who delights in her shafts and strikes down the stag ... She ranges over shady hills and windy heights, rejoicing in the chase as she draws her bow, made all of silver, and shoots her shafts of woe.”

The Greek poet Callimachus tells the story of the goddess Artemis in his Hymn to Artemis, composed around 250 B.C. As a young girl, Artemis begged her father to grant her three wishes: to remain unmarried; to have many names; and to give her a bow and arrows.

“Artemis we hymn ... whose study is the bow and the shooting of hares and the spacious dance and sport upon the mountains, beginning with the time when sitting on her father’s [Zeus’] knees – still a little maid – she spake these words to her sire:

“Give to me to keep my maidenhood,

Father, for ever, and give me to be of many names, that Phoebus may not vie with me.

““And give me arrows and a bow ...

““But give me to be the Bringer of Light, and give me to gird me in a tunic with embroidered border reaching to the knee, that I may slay wild beasts.

““And give me sixty daughters of Oceanus for my choir – all nine years old, all maidens yet ungirdled; and give me for handmaidens twenty nymphs of Amnisus [a river in Crete] who shall tend well my buskins, and, when I shoot no more at lynx or stag, shall tend my swift hounds.

“And give to me all mountains, and for city, assign me any, even whatsoever thou wilt, for seldom is it that Artemis goes down to town. On the mountains will I dwell and the cities of men I will visit only when women vexed by sharp pangs of childbirth call me to their aid ...’

“And to thee the bearded god gave two dogs black-and-white, three reddish, and one spotted, which pulled down very lions when they clutched their throats and haled them still living to the fold. And he gave thee seven Cynosurian [Arcadian] bitches swifter than the winds ...

“Artemis, Lady of Maidenhood, Slayer of Tityus, golden were thine arms and golden thy belt, and a golden car didst thou yoke, and golden bridles, goddess, didst thou put on thy deer ...

“And how often, goddess, didst thou make trial of thy silver bow? ... not long was it ere thou didst shoot at the city of unjust men, those who to one another and those who towards strangers wrought many deeds of sin, forward men, on whom thou wilt impress thy grievous wrath. On their cattle plague feeds, on their tilth feeds frost, and the old men cut their hair in mourning over their sons, and their wives either are smitten and die in childbirth, or, if they escape, bear births whereof none stands on upright ankle.

“But on whomsoever thou lookest smiling and gracious, for them the tilth bears the corn-ear abundantly, and abundantly prospers the

four-footed breed, and abundant waxes their prosperity: neither do they go to the tomb, save when they carry thither the aged.”

Callimachus adds a list of places where Artemis was worshipped: “But when the nymphs encircle thee in the dance, near the springs of Egyptian Inopus, or Pitane – for Pitane is thine – or in Limnae, or where, goddess, thou camest from Scythia to dwell, in Alae Araphenides [located between Marathon and Brauron], renouncing the rites of the Tauri ... Of islands Doliche hath found favor with thee, of cities Perge [in Pamphylia], of hills Taygeton [in Laconia]...”

The worship of Artemis was often accompanied by dancing. Judging by the accounts of ancient authors, these dances were noisy events. (Homer calls Artemis the “noisy goddess.” He also calls her the “wearer of the bow” or “the archeress” and gives her the title “hagne,” a word that combines “holy” and “pure.”) Torches also seem to have been an important part of the dance – which was perhaps performed in circles, by torch-carrying women.

One Classical ritual dedicated to Artemis involved special cakes called “amphiphontes” (“shining all around”) that were ringed with a circle of candles. These were carried in a procession on the sixteenth of Munichion, and were also used as private offerings to Artemis.

A fragment of the comedy *The Poor Girl* (also known as *The Girl From Rhodes*) by the playwright Philemon (361-263 B.C.) contains the prayer: “Artemis, dear mistress, to you I carry, lady, this cake shining all around and what is to serve as a drink offering.”

Artemis is often depicted with groups of women dancing around her. Two stone statues from Aulis show Artemis with a bow (on one statue) and with torches (on the other statue). In vases from the 5th century B.C. Artemis holds a torch in both hands.

The shrine of Artemis Hegemone (“Guiding Artemis”) near Acacesium was reported by Pausanias to include a bronze state of Artemis with torches in her hands. “Artemis is standing ... wearing a deer skin and carrying a quiver on her shoulder, holding a light in one hand and two serpents in the other. There is a hunting dog next to Artemis.”

Snakes, however, were not a regular part of Artemis’ retinue. She is mainly accompanied by lions, stags, birds, swans or griffins.

There are no descriptions of how the Amazons themselves worshipped Artemis. But Aelian, a Roman writer of the 2nd and 3rd centuries A.D., describes women worshipping her at Ephesus. He compares the movements in their ritual dance to those of the wagtail bird, which shakes its tail feathers. He quotes Autocrates' *Tympanitae* as the source of his description of the dance. "... sweet maidens, daughters of Lydia, sport and lightly leap and clap their hands in the temple of Artemis the fair at Ephesus, now sinking down upon their haunches and again springing up, like the hopping wagtail."

Xenophon provides a description of the procession held to honor Artemis at Ephesus in the romantic story *An Ephesian Tale*. The description is likely of the type of festival held in Xenophon's day (the 5th century B.C.) and thus would be hundreds of years later – and possibly dramatically different – than the festivals originated by the Amazons. But since religious traditions tend to be passed down through the centuries, it is possible that at least some of the elements were similar.

"The local festival of Artemis was in progress, and the procession moved from the city to the shrine; the distance was seven furlongs [about one and a half kilometers]. Usage required that all the maidens of the region, richly attired, and all the lads ... join in the procession.

"A great concourse had assembled for the spectacle; there were many Ephesians and many visitors, for it was customary for bridegrooms to be found for maidens at the festival, and wives for the cadets.

"And so the procession moved past. In the van were the sacred objects, the torches, the baskets, and the incense. Following these were horses and dogs and hunting gear; there was some display of military equipment, but more of the arts of peace.

"The girls in the procession were all decked out as if to meet lovers. Of the band the leader was Anthia.

"Her dress was a frock of purple, fitted down to the knee and hanging loose over the arms. Her wrap was a fawn skin, and a quiver hung from her shoulder. She carried bow and

javelins, and dogs followed at her heels. Time and again when the Ephesians saw her in the sacred precinct they bowed down as to Artemis.

"When the procession was finished the entire multitude approached the shrine to offer sacrifice."

According to Diodorus of Sicily, the second tribe of Amazons (those who lived in Themiscyra, on the Black Sea coast) worshipped "Artemis who is called *Tauropolus*."

When the Mycenaean princess Iphigenia was sacrificed to Artemis by her father (Agamemnon, leader of the forces that attacked Troy during the Trojan War) the goddess carried the girl to her temple in *Tauropolis* (located in the modern Crimea). The rituals that accompanied Iphigenia's sacrifice are described by the Greek playwright Euripides in his play *Iphigenia at Aulis*, produced in the 5th century B.C.

The play mentions dances around the altar, which is located in a "flower-laden meadow." The sacrifice involves throwing meal cakes in a "cleansing fire," chanting or singing, dancing, and cutting open the neck of the sacrificial victim with a sword. Unaware that she is about to be sacrificed, Iphigenia directs the ritual:

"Do you, young women, raise with good omen the paean for my lot, to Zeus' maid Artemis. Let someone initiate the rites with the sacred baskets, let the fire blaze with the cakes of purification and let my father circle the altar from the left toward the right. Give me garlands to put on – here is my hair to crown. Bring me fountains of lustral water. Weave the dance about the temple, about the altar of Artemis, about Queen Artemis the blessed."

Another play by Euripides, *Iphigenia Among the Taurians*, was performed around 414-412 B.C. In this play, the goddess Artemis substitutes a deer for Iphigenia on the altar; the animal is sacrificed in her place.

Apollodorus tells the story, adding the reason why the goddess Artemis withheld the winds.

"[The Greeks] could not sail unless the fairest of Agamemnon's daughters were

presented as a sacrifice to Artemis; for the goddess was angry with Agamamnon, both because, on shooting a deer, he had said, 'Artemis herself could not [do it better],' and because Atreus had not sacrificed to her the golden lamb ...

"Agamemnon set [Iphigenia] beside the altar, and was about to slaughter her, when Artemis carried her off to the Taurians and appointed her to be her priestess, substituting a deer for her at the altar. But some say that Artemis made her immortal."

As a priestess of Artemis in Tauria, Iphigenia is responsible for sprinkling the lustral water around the hair of victims (male strangers) who are sacrificed to the goddess. Because she is a priestess, her robes may not be touched. Only she may touch the statue of Artemis, which sits on a pedestal.

In the play, Taurian Artemis is described as "Artemis, goddess of mothers, in her dwelling by the Cynthian hill, by the delicate palm tree and the lovely laurel and the sacred shoots of the pale olive, sweet shelter of Leto's travail (a reference to giving birth), by the swirling waters of the circular lake where the swans pay melodious services to the Muses."

Two passages describe funeral rites, as performed by Iphigenia. "I shall sprinkle upon the earth's surface these libations, the cup of the dead: milk from the mountain kine, wine draughts of Bacchus, and the labor of the tawny bees (honey), the offerings established for soothing the departed." The second passage reads, "I shall set out much adornment for your burial, and I shall quench your body with yellow oil, and I shall cast upon your pyre the bright labor of the tawny mountain bee, gathered from the flowers."

The wooden image of Artemis Tauropolus was supposedly stolen by Iphigenia's brother Orestes, and taken to Greece. According to Apollodorus, the statue was later set up in Halae, in Attica, or in Brauron. It was propitiated by using a sword to draw blood from a man's neck (as opposed to sacrificing him by killing him).

Since the Amazons were closely connected with the goddess Artemis, it is possible that the stories of them killing the men of their tribe originated in accounts of the ritual sacrifice of men by the Taurians who worshipped Artemis.

It is also possible that the legends about Amazons either cutting off or searing one breast had their origin in the frenzied worship of Tauric Artemis. The Christian apologist Arnobius, who taught in Africa during the reign of Diocletian (A.D. 284-305), describes a religious frenzy in which the daughter of a Gallus cut off her breasts.

In the ancient world, goddesses were either confused with one another – or deliberately fused into a single deity. Rituals, titles, and attributes were likewise blended.

Florence Mary Bennett says that the goddess that came to be known as the "Thracian Artemis" was in fact the Thracian goddess Bendis, a fierce hunter with two spears who was "of the heavens and of the earth," and who received human sacrifice. This goddess, who was also known as the "great goddess" of Lemnos, was worshipped in rites using torches.

Bennett argues that Bendis was taken over by the Greeks and transformed into Artemis. She notes: "The torch did not appear as a feature in the Hellenic worship of Artemis until the 5th century B.C. After that is connection with the cult becomes steadily more and more prominent. Its association with the goddess may be traced historically to the influence of orgiastic rituals from Thrace and Asia Minor, like those of the Mother [Goddess] and Dionysus."

The offerings made to Artemis varied from place to place, but often involved the sacrifice of animals. Artemis Laphria was honored at Patrae in an annual festival in which wild beasts were burned alive in an enclosure around her altar. The modern writer Walter F. Otto adds details. "On the day before [Artemis'] festival at Patras there was a brilliant festival procession which closed with the virgin priestesses of Artemis riding on a chariot drawn by stags. On the day following there were thrown upon the altar, which was transformed into a pyre, living wild boars, deer, roe, wolf and bears cubs, and even full-grown animals of the same species. If an animal attempted to escape from the flames it was driven back ..."

Artemis was perceived not only as a huntress but also as a warrior. In Messenia a bronze statue of carried weapons and a shield, and Laodicean coins show her as armed. The Spartans even sacrificed to Artemis before going into battle. They called the goddess Artemis Orthia.

Women who served Artemis had different

functions, as can be seen from a passage in Aristophanes' play *Lysistrata*:

“At the age of seven at once I carried the secret objects. Then I was a corn grinder. At ten, for the presiding goddess I was a bear shedding the saffron robe at the Bauronia, and some time I carried in a basket a bunch of dried figs when I was a young girl.”

The ritual at Bruron, in which young girls played the parts of bears, again shows Artemis' link with wild creatures. The girls, aged five to ten, were dressed in long yellow (saffron) robes and probably mimed the actions of a bear walking on its hind legs.

The myth explaining this ritual tells the story of a female bear who lived in a sanctuary of Artemis. The bear attacked a young girl who had teased it, tearing out one of the girl's eyes. The girl's family killed the bear, and a plague followed. An oracle told the Athenians that their daughters would have to act the part of the bear to appease the goddess. The Athenians voted that, before a girl could marry, she had to perform this service.

## **NYSA & THE TRITON RIVER**

Dionysus was the son of Amaltheia, a woman who became enamored of the king Ammon when he traveled to the area where she lived, a part of the kingdom near the Ceraunian Mountains. When she gave birth to a son, the king gave her “supreme power” over “all the region round about, which was shaped like the horn of a bull and for this reason was known as Hesperoukeras.” (Horn of Hesperus). The region was later named Amaltheias Keras, or Horn of Amaltheia.

Fearful that his wife Rhea would become jealous (and rightfully so, for it was her urgings that later turned her brother Cronus against Ammon), the king sent the young Dionysus to Nysa. Here, he was tended by the goddess Athena

Diodorus reports that Nysa was located a “great distance” away from the area ruled by Amaltheia, yet also notes that it lay on an island in the River Triton – the area said to have been the homeland of the African Amazons.

“The city lies on a certain island which is

surrounded by the river Triton and is precipitous on all sides save at one place where there is a narrow pass which tears the name ‘Nysaeon Gates.’ The land of the island is rich, is traversed at intervals by pleasant meadows and watered by abundant streams from springs, and possesses every kind of fruit-bearing tree and the wild vine in abundance ...

“The entrance to the island is like a glen at its beginning, being thickly shaded by lofty trees growing close together, so that the sun never shines at all through the close-set branches ...

“Everywhere along the lanes ... springs of water gush forth of exceeding sweetness ... Further in there is a cave, circular in shape and of marvelous size and beauty. For above and all about it rises a crag of immense height, formed of rocks of different colors, for the rocks lie in bands and send forth a bright gleam, some like that purple which comes from the sea, some bluish and others like every other kind of brilliant hue ...

“When one has passed the entrance the cave is seen to widen out and to be lighted all about by the rays of the sun, and all kinds of flowering plants grow there ...”

## **THE “AMAZON” ATHENA**

Athena, the goddess who would command the Amazons who joined Dionysus' campaign, was said by Diodorus to have been “born of the earth and ... found beside the river Triton, from which she had been called Tritonis.”<sup>35</sup> Her attributes, as Diodorus records them, are reminiscent of other descriptions of the Amazons.

“... this goddess, choosing to spend all her days in maidenhood, excelled in virtue and invented most of the crafts ... she cultivated also the arts of war, and since she excelled in courage and in bodily strength she performed many other deeds worthy of memory and slew the Aegis, as it was called, a certain frightful monster which was a difficult antagonist to overcome.”

This fire-breathing monster first appeared in Phrygia<sup>36</sup> and left a trail of destruction through the Taurus mountains as far as India, through Phoenicia and Egypt, and across Libya to Ceraunia.

“And since the country round about was going up in flames and the inhabitants in some cases were being destroyed and in others were leaving their native countries in their terror and removing to distant regions, Athena, they say, overcoming the monster partly through her intelligence and partly through her courage and bodily strength, slew it, and covering her breast with its hide bore this about with her, both as a covering and protection for her body against later dangers, and as a memorial of her valor and of her well merited fame.”

Pausanias, commenting on an image of the goddess that featured gray-green eyes, notes, “The Libyans have written that Atheneia was the daughter of Poseidon and the Tritonian lake, and has Poseidon’s green-green eyes.”<sup>37</sup> But he later notes that the Triton River that Athena was born beside was located in Greece, near a village by the name of Alalkomenai in Boeotia: “There is a river running here of no great size, a winter river. They call it the Triton, as the legend is that the child Athena was brought up by the river Triton; the Triton in fact is this one, not the Libyan river that runs into the sea off Libya from the Tritonian lake.”

Even as a girl, Athena displayed warlike characteristics. Apollodorus describes her early life.

“They say that when Athena was born she was brought up by Triton, who had a daughter Pallas, and that both girls practiced the arts of war, but that once on a time they fell out. And when Pallas was about to strike a blow, Zeus in fear interposed the aegis [his shield that he used to frighten his enemies] and Pallas, being startled, looked up, and so fell wounded by Athena.

“And been exceedingly grieved for her, Athena made a wooden image in her likeness, and wrapped the aegis, which she had feared, about the breast of it, and set it up beside Zeus and honored it.”

Was Athena an Amazon queen who led an army in

defense against a Phrygian foe whose destructive war tactics gave rise to the legend of a fire-breathing monster? Did Athena flay her enemy and use his skin as armor, with the result that history recalls him only as “Aegis” or “hide”?

## THE GORGONS

The Gorgons were enemies of the Amazons of Africa, but seem also to have had a female ruler, the queen Medusa. (According to the accounts of how their female prisoners fought back against Myrina’s soldiers, they also seem to have had strong female fighters.)

The Gorgons were attacked by Perseus, an Achaean king who ruled the cities of Mycenae and Tiryns prior to the Trojan War. (According to Diodorus, Perseus’ attack took place after the Amazon attack on the Gorgons.) Apollodorus of Athens, who wrote a handbook of Greek mythology in the 2nd century A.D., tells the story, in which Perseus is armed with a magical pouch, winged sandals, a helmet which made him invisible, an adamantine sickle, and a reflective bronze shield provided by Athena. To gain some of these magical treasures, he had to first trick the daughters of Phorcus, sisters of the Gorgons.

“He made his way to the daughters of [the sea god] Phorcus, to wit, Enyo, Pephredo, and Dino; for Phorcus had them by Ceto, and they were sisters of the Gorgons, and old women from their birth.

“The three had but one eye and one tooth, and these they passed to each other in turn. Perseus got possession of the eye and the tooth, and when they asked them back, he said he would give them up if they would show him the way to the nymphs [who] ... had the winged sandals and the kibisis, which they say was a wallet.”

“[Perseus] flew to the ocean and caught the Gorgons asleep. They were Stheno, Euryale,<sup>38</sup> and Medusa.

“Now Medusa alone was mortal; for that reason Perseus was sent to fetch her head. But the Gorgons had heads twined about with the scales of dragons, and great tusks like swine’s, and brazen hands, and golden wings, by which

they flew; and they turned to stone such as beheld them. So Perseus stood over them as they slept, and while Athena guided his hand and he looked with averted gaze on a brazen shield, in which he beheld the image of the Gorgon, he beheaded her.

“When her head was cut off, there sprang from the Gorgon the winged horse Pegasus and Chrysaor [a male offspring whose name means “Golden Sword”]...

“So Perseus put the head of Medusa in the wallet [kibisis] and went back again; but the Gorgons started up from their slumber and pursued Perseus: but they could not see him on account of the cap ...

“... the Gorgon’s head he gave to Athena. ... [She] inserted the Gorgon’s head in the middle of her shield.<sup>39</sup>

“But it is alleged by some that Medusa was beheaded for Athena’s sake; and they say that the Gorgon was fain to match herself with the goddess even in beauty.”

It is interesting to speculate that, if Athena were indeed an Amazon queen whom the Greeks later turned into a goddess, that she sought the alliance of the Achaeans in an attack on the Gorgons.

Medusa’s severed head was said to have the power to turn those who looked upon it to stone. A mere lock of her hair, held aloft three times, was sufficient to make an army turn and run. Blood from the left side of her body was a deadly poison, while blood from the right side could raise the dead. Her head was reported by Pausanias to have been buried under an earth mound in the Greek city of Argos.

Greek black figure vases found in Corinth and dating from the Classical period show the Gorgons as winged women with snake hair and boar’s-tusk teeth. But in the writings of at least one ancient author, Medusa is described as beautiful. The Roman poet Ovid (43 B.C. - 17 A.D.) explains the transformation.

“She was very lovely once, the hope of many an envious suitor, and of all her beauties her hair was most beautiful ... One day [Poseidon] found her and raped her in [Athena’s] temple, and the goddess turned away, and hid her eyes behind her shield, and,

punishing the outrage as it deserved, she changed [Medusa’s] hair to serpents ...”

The Gorgons are described by Hesiod, a Greek poet who lived in the 8th century B.C. He gives their names as Sthenno, Euryale, and Medusa, and says that they lived “beyond the famous stream of the Ocean ... in the utmost place toward night (the west), by the singing Hesperides.” He also describes a shield that depicted Perseus’ escape from the Gorgons.

“The son of Danae, Perseus himself, sped onward, like one who goes in haste and terror, as meanwhile the rest of the Gorgons tumbled along behind him, unapproachable, indescribable, straining to catch and grab him, and on the green of the steel surface gibbered the sound of their feet on the shield running with a sharp high noise, and on the belts of the Gorgons a pair of snakes were suspended, but they reared and bent their heads forward and flickered with their tongues. The teeth for their rage were made jagged and their staring fierce, and over the dreaded heads of the Gorgons was great Panic shivering.”

Before attacking the Gorgons, Perseus had to defeat their elderly sisters, two (or three) women known as the Graeae. According to Apollodorus, these women shared a single eye and tooth between them. Hyginus, a Roman author of the 1st century B.C., says that the Graeae were guardians of the Gorgons. (Here he is citing the playwright Aeschylus.) Their names were Enyo, Pemphredo (or Pephredo) and Deino.

“They are thought to have had but one eye among them, and thus to have kept guard, each one taking it in her turn. This eye Perseus snatched, as one was passing it to another, and threw it in Lake Tritonis. So, when the guards were blinded, he easily killed the Gorgon when she was overcome with sleep.

“[Athena] is said to have the head on her breastplate. Euhemerus says the Gorgon was killed by [Athena].”

According to Pausanias, Medusa ruled a nation centered around Lake Tritonis. (Did the Gorgons

ultimately drive the Amazons away from this region, or did the ancient writers confuse the two women-ruled nations?)

“[Medusa] was a daughter of Phorkys, and when her father died she was queen of the people around Lake Tritonis; she used to go out hunting and command the Libyans in battle, and in fact at that time she stood up to Perseus with his force of picked men from the Peloponnese.

“She was treacherously murdered at night, but Perseus was wonderstruck with the beauty even of her dead body and cut off her head to show it in Greece.

“But a story from a Carthaginian called Prokles seems to me more convincing than that. Among the incredible monsters of the Libyan desert are human savages ... He imagined some woman straying from these savages who came to Lake Tritonis and devastated the territory until Perseus killed her; he must have thought Athena helped him to do the deed because the people around Lake Tritonis are sacred to her.”

The Roman poet Virgil (70-19 B.C.) mentions African warrior women in the *Aeneid*, which told the story of Aeneas, one of the survivors of the Trojan War. Landing near the city of Carthage in ancient Libya, Aeneas meets his mother, the goddess Venus (Aphrodite) who has taken the appearance of one of the warriors of the ruler of Carthage, Queen Dido.

“Aeneas and Achates went forth together, armed, down the trail in the forest, and there his mother met him, a girl, it seemed, from Thrace or Sparta, trim as any huntress who rides her horses hard or outspeeds rivers in her swift going. A bow hung over her shoulder; her hair blew free. Her knees were bare; her garments tucked at the waist and knotted.

“As she saw them, ‘Ho there, young men,’ she cried, ‘have you seen my sister around here anywhere? She wears a quiver and a spotted lynx hide; maybe you have heard her hunting the boar and shouting?’

“... The Tyrian girls [settlers in Carthage]

all wear these crimson leggings like mine, and carry quivers. Tyrian folk live here; their city is Carthage. Over the border lies Libya, warlike people. Our queen, Dido, came here from Tyre.”

During the time of the Trojan War, Carthage did not exist. It was founded centuries later (according to tradition, in 814 B.C.), by Princess Dido of the Phoenician city of Tyre. The earliest archaeological date established for the city is 735 B.C.

It is likely that Virgil, hearing reports of the early Amazons of Africa, simply dressed and armed his characters accordingly.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Greek word “mazos” means “breast.” The word “a-mazos,” said to be the root of the name Amazon, translates as “without a breast.”

<sup>2</sup> Hesperia (also spelled Hespereia) translates as “Land of the Evening.” It is interesting to note the similarity between this name and that of the Hesperides (“Daughters of Evening”), the women from whom Heracles stole golden apples from as one of his labors. (Heracles shows up later as an opponent of the Libyan Amazons.) The ancient writer Apollonius of Rhodes said they lived near the “Tritonian lagoon.”

<sup>3</sup> According to Edward Tripp, who compiled a handbook of Classical mythology, the Tritonis was a large lake in western Libya that today is known as the Chott Djerid.

<sup>4</sup> Ancient Greek geographers conceived of the world as the continents of Europe, Asia, and Libya (Africa), surrounded by a circle of water. In this instance, Diodorus is referring to the Atlantic Ocean, thought to be part of this encircling ocean.

<sup>5</sup> The Atlas Mountains run through Morocco and northern Algeria.

<sup>6</sup> According to Diodorus, Mene was the original name of the moon goddess Selene. This goddess was the granddaughter of the first king of the Atlantians, Uranus.

<sup>7</sup> Anthrax was a precious dark red stone; the term included carbuncles, rubies, and garnets. Sardine included cornelian and sardine. Smaragdos was a term used for any green stone.

<sup>8</sup> The word “cherronesus” means “peninsula.”

---

<sup>9</sup> Pausanias, a Greek historian of the 2nd century A.D., placed the Atlantes “beside Atlas.” Diodorus located them “in the regions on the edge of the (Atlantic) ocean,” in a “fertile country.”

<sup>10</sup> The mention of snakes is interesting, since the snake-haired Queen Medusa later ruled this region.

<sup>11</sup> Perseus was an Achaean king of the ancient Greek cities of Mycenae and Tiryns, and a great-grandfather of the Achaean Heracles, whose sons and grandsons fought in the Trojan War, circa 1200 B.C. This places him four or five generations before that war. Thus the Amazon attack on the Gorgons had to have taken place at a more distant point in time, probably prior to about 1300 B.C.

<sup>12</sup> There were three men who bore this name in ancient times. According to Diodorus, their legends were combined to form the story of the “twelve labors” of the Achaean prince of the ancient Greek city of Tiryns. The Heracles mentioned here was born in Egypt and “had subdued with arms a large part of the inhabited world, and had set up the pillar which is in Libya ...” The most likely location of the pillars is at modern Gibraltar.

<sup>13</sup> Horus was the falcon-headed god of northern Egypt. His name was used by the pharaohs of Egypt during the time of the first through third dynasties (circa 3100-2613 B.C.).

<sup>14</sup> A queen of Egypt named Isis was the wife of King Ramesses III (circa 1198-1166 B.C.). Isis was also the name of a goddess.

<sup>15</sup> The Cilicians lived along the northeastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea, just north of Cyprus.

<sup>16</sup> This river empties into the Aegean Sea at a point just south of the island of Lesbos.

<sup>17</sup> Two cities bore the name of Myrina in ancient times. One was located on the island of Lemnos, while the other was on the Aegean coast of modern Turkey.

<sup>18</sup> Pitana was alternatively spelled Pitane. In Greek myth, a woman named Pitane was said to be the mother, by Poseidon, of Evadne.

<sup>19</sup> These cities, all located along the Aegean coast of modern Turkey, were occupied in historical times by the Greek and Romans. Pitana is also spelled Pitane. Today these cities lie in ruins. A second Cyme is located on the west coast of Italy.

<sup>20</sup> This city is still occupied today. The modern spelling is Mitlini.

---

<sup>21</sup> The goddess Cybele.

<sup>22</sup> Lycurgus was king of a Thracian tribe known as the Edonians or Edoni, which lived near Mount Pangaeus.

<sup>23</sup> The name Sipylus appears in this region as Mount Sipylus, a mountain that lies to the southeast of Myrina, near the ancient city of Smyrna. The mountain is now known as Manisa Dag.

<sup>24</sup> These four cities are all located along the Aegean coast of Turkey.

<sup>25</sup> The city of Paphos is on the island of Cyprus.

<sup>26</sup> Gryne and Magnesia are located on the Aegean coast of Turkey. There are two cities named Magnesia in this region.

<sup>27</sup> The modern name of this Libyan city is Benghazi.

<sup>28</sup> The aegis was a shield which the god Zeus used to paralyze his enemies with terror. According to Greek mythology, it was also sometimes used by the goddess Athene. The name comes from the word “aigis”; early Greek shields were made of goat’s hide.

<sup>29</sup> The shield of the goddess Athene (who was said to have been born beside the Triton River) featured at its center the head of Medusa, the snake-haired woman beheaded by the Achaean king Perseus.

<sup>30</sup> The Achaean king Pelops ruled Pisa, a city in Elis, a region on the west coast of the Peloponnesus in Greece.

<sup>31</sup> This passage likely describes the shortest route between the African coast and Crete. The point where the land “falls away” would be the Libyan cape of Ras et Tin, near the Gulf of Bomba.

<sup>32</sup> The Dionysus of the Libyan legends is the son of Amaltheia and Ammon, a Libyan king who wore a helmet in the shape of a ram’s head and ruled a kingdom “on the shore of the ocean.” (The west Egyptian oasis dwellers worshipped a god named Ammon whose symbol was a ram.) Diodorus Siculus distinguishes between this “first” Dionysus and the Achaean Dionysus who was the son of Semele. He cites Dionysius’ writings as the source of these Libyan legends.

<sup>33</sup> The location of this city is in question. It is variously located in Libya, Ethiopia, Thrace, and India, but a north African location seems to tie in best with the stories of the African Amazons.

<sup>34</sup> Hippo is probably a shortened form of

---

Hippolyte, an early queen of the Amazons.

<sup>35</sup> Pausanias denies Athene a Libyan birthplace, insisting that the Triton River she was born beside is one found in Greece.

<sup>36</sup> Phygia was located in what today is northwestern Turkey.

<sup>37</sup> Peter Levi, who translates Pausanias, notes that the origin of “gray-green eyes” was Homeric, and can also be translated as “owl-faced.”

<sup>38</sup> A Themiscyran Amazon by this name was said to have fought against the Scythians at Colchis, with the forces of King Aeetes.

<sup>39</sup> Athene alternatively is shown with Medusa’s head hung around her neck, hanging against the front of her tunic.