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Art as Propaganda in Ancient Greece: The Feeding of the Greek Soldier's Ego

The stories of an all-female warrior race had long been told and depicted in artistic forms prior to sixth century Greece. These tales, that may have had some basis in real life events, were eventually woven into the cloak of influence that the classical Greeks wore in their rally to control the world around them. Many of these accounts focused on the overpowering strength of Greece's military and their soldier heroes, such as Achilles. In Achilles' case, in battle against the Amazon Queen Penthesilea at Troy, artistic depictions of the accounts of the struggle became less about the struggle between two great fighters and more about the domination of any outside force that challenged the Greek empire. The depiction of Penthesilea on the frieze at the Temple of Apollo Epikourios at Bassai 429 BCE¹, (see figure 1), pleading for Achilles' sympathy as he is about to kill her differs greatly from the display of her wielding a spear and fighting to the death on a black figure amphora 530-525 BCE², (see figure 2). The difference in these representations of Penthesilea may have been due to the growing advancements and challenges in the Greek empire as a military and political power, determined on dominating all forces, real or mythical, that presented a threat to their power.

So why do the depictions of Penthesilea fighting Achilles vary so drastically in a mere one-hundred-year span? As modern day citizens we are privy to changing styles and tastes, but these two pieces seem to represent more than just an artistic style shift. The difference seems to represent a deviation from mere story-telling into glorifying the Greeks against all known enemies. The vase, painted by Exekias³, portrays the oldest known version of Penthesilea's death while defending Troy as told in Arctinus' summary of the *Aethiopis*:

¹ Cooper, *The Temple of Apollo Bassitas*, vii.

² The British Museum, collection online. Penthesilea Black Figure Amphora.

³ *Ibid.*

The Amazon Penthesileia, the daughter of Ares and of Thracian race, comes to aid the Trojans, and after showing great prowess, is killed by Achilles and buried by the Trojans. Achilles then slays Thersites for abusing and reviling him for his supposed love for Penthesileia. (Arctinus, Fragment 1.)

The painter/potter Exekias interprets this story in a legitimate fashion, he shows Penthesilea appropriately dressed in a short diapered chiton, a fitting dress for fighting and horse riding, and draped over her is a *pardalis* (leopard skin). She is symbolized as a proper warrior with her high-crested war helmet complete with cheek pieces, her sword slung across her back, and shield in hand, an equal fighter to the great Achilles. She thrusts her spear towards Achilles even as he deals the death-blow of a spearhead into her neck causing blood to rush out from the puncture wound.⁴ If we consider the stories of the Amazons from the ancient texts, this is the fitting war death for an Amazon Queen.

One hundred years later in the construction of the Temple at Bassai, what would have changed that influenced the interpretation of the myth of Achilles and Penthesilea's encounter on the battlefield at Troy? The literary accounts were the same as far as the story of Achilles and Penthesilea's encounter at Troy were concerned, but current writers made a point to remind Greeks of the savage lifestyle of the Amazons. Both Herodotus, the father of history, and Hippocrates wrote accounts of the barbarian life styles of these warrior women who had a rule that they could not marry before slaying a specified number of their enemies. Lysias managed to weave an explanation of why the Amazons no longer existed in a speech he wrote in praise of dead Greeks instructing "the living in the message that the city continues to merit such sacrifices through rehearsing a litany of their ancestor's feats: repulsing the Amazons, harboring the sons of Heracles, and recovering the Theban Dead."⁵ In this speech, given in Athens not long after the construction of the Temple at Bassai, Lysias describes the fall of the Amazons,

In ancient times were the Amazons, daughters of Ares, dwelling beside the river Thermodon; they alone of the people round about were armed with iron, and they were first of all to mount horses, with which, owing to the inexperience of their

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Tyrrell, *Athenian Myths and Institutions*, p. 199.

foes, they surprised them and either caught those who fled, or outstripped those who pursued. They were accounted as men for their high courage, rather than as women for their sex; so much more did they seem to excel men in their spirit than to be at a disadvantage in their form. Ruling over many nations, they had in fact achieved the enslavement of those around them; yet, hearing by report concerning this our country how great was its renown, they were moved by increase of glory and high ambition to muster the most warlike of the nations and march with them against this city. But having met with valiant men they found their spirit now was like to their sex; the repute that they got was the reverse of the former, and by their perils rather than by their bodies they were deemed to be women. They stood alone in failing to learn from their mistakes, and so to be better advised in their future actions; they would not return home and report their own misfortune and our ancestors' valor: for they perished on the spot, and were punished for their folly, thus making our city's memory imperishable for its valor; while owing to their disaster in this region they rendered their own country nameless. And so those women, by their unjust greed for others' land, justly lost their own. (Lysias, *Epitaphios 4-6*)

While the myths stayed the same, the modern day commentaries of the 5th and 4th century BCE pointed out that the obvious failure of the Amazons was due to the engagement with the Greek empire in military clashes. Here lies an explanation as to why the artistic representations changed, at least in the realm of public art. While Lysias gives praise to the Amazons' potent military skills, he uses their known greatness to build on the Greeks' own sense of military championship.

The amphora would have been in someone's home and used most likely as a wine vessel, considering that the opposite side of the vase shows Dionysos with his son Oinopian.⁶ We can assume this was what we would call in modern parlance a conversation piece, functional art that was meant to inspire reflection upon the stories of Greek history. In contrast, the frieze panels at Bassai were a monumental public art display housed in a temple built for Apollo, the very God

⁶ The British Museum, collection online. Penthesilea Black Figure Amphora.

who aids young men into manhood and serves as an advisor on matters of war.⁷ The temple was erected to honor Apollo Epikourios, which translates to Apollo the Helper.⁸ Recent scholars have suggested that *epikourios* refers to the mercenary soldiers that were the main export of Arkadia⁹, and who are noted as the main donors to the construction of the temple that sits high in the Arkadian landscape atop Mount Kotilion.¹⁰ These were soldiers for hire from a poor region, and who presumably spent the majority of their time training or engrossed in fighting. It seems fitting that the depiction of a battle between Greek soldiers and any opposing force would represent the Greeks dominating all foes. This may explain why the mighty Penthesilea is characterized as someone who begs for mercy from her opponent, the greatest known Greek warrior, Achilles. The Arcadian sculptors represented Penthesilea and the Amazons as vulnerable opponents wearing knee length, wind-blown peploi, no leggings, very slight head coverings and exposed breasts, hinting that as the weaker sex they presented no challenge to the power of the Greek guard.

Diodorus describes Penthesilea as an equal to men in battle, taking many Greek lives and dying heroically at the hands of Achilles, (Diod. Sic. 2,46,5). Quintus Smyrnaeus describes Penthesilea's warrior ways in his account of the Trojan War:

Such was the unfailing strength of Penthesilea. Just as a lioness high in the mountains darts through a rocky glen to pounce on a herd of cattle, thirsty for the blood that warms her heart, so then the war god's daughter pounced on the Danaans. They shrank from her in a state of bewilderment. She pursued them as a wave of the deep-booming sea follows speeding ships, when their white sails are stretched by a favoring gale; all round are bellowing headlands and a roaring sea on a long line of coast. So she pursued and ravaged the ranks of the Danaans,... (*Quint.Smyrn. 1,314-324*)

⁷ Larson, *Ancient Greek Cults*, p.86.

⁸ Tritle, *The Peloponnesian War*, pp. 49-50.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Larson, *Ancient Greek Cult*, p.99.

Both Diodorus and Quintus's accounts came well after the construction of the temple at Bassai, but considering the *Aethiopsis* fragment quoted above it can be assumed that this was the common recollection and account of the Amazon Queen's role in the Trojan War. These tales had been passed down orally for centuries, continuous reminders of those who had challenged the empire and their ultimate failings.

The frieze at Bassai contrasts the literary representation of Penthesilea (see figure 1). Here she has an out stretched arm, begging for mercy to Achilles, whose sword ends her life. The sculptor's translation outwardly denies Penthesilea's supposed blood-thirsty, battle-driven mentality for an ostensibly helpless feminine variation. The sculptor even goes so far as to have Achilles stepping on Penthesilea to show his dominance. Showing Penthesilea in such an assailable and exposed position when all of the known versions of the myth present her as skilled fighter would have heightened the male soldiers' ego and boosted the patriotism of Greek empire. The myths depict the Amazons as strong warriors, even creating fear among Greek troops at times, so there may have been a desire to portray them as lesser beings on the battlefield to instill a sense of potency throughout Greek culture. By depicting their enemies as vulnerable, they stood to take control of the story as it passed through history and shred the notion that women could be equals to men in any manner.

This use of art to push forward the idea of an unstoppable Greek army may have its roots in the events of Greece contemporary to the of the creation of these objects. During the 6th century BCE, Greece was experiencing a near explosion of political, military, philosophical, and artistic advancements. By this time the Greek alphabet had spawned poets and writers, the seeds of democracy had been sown in Athens by Solon, the Persian invaders were being pushed back by Athenian troops on land and sea, and city-states were developed.¹¹ The population was increasing spurring the need for more house-wares, thus explaining the staggering amount of pottery from this era that is still being unearthed today. The Athenian artist known as Exekias had a functional canvas in the ceramics he created and painted. The Gods and the myths surrounding the accounts of how Greece came to be were the entertainment of ancient Greece, as well as a means to retain knowledge of historical events. To a population that was mostly illiterate, art was the means to transfer these stories. Plays, sculptures, architecture, and paintings would help the people stay tuned to the civilization that was growing around them. Exekias

¹¹ McGill, *Ancient Greece Timeline*, pp. 1-2.

presents Penthesilea and Achilles in literal fashion, taking depictions straight from the epics and poems of the day.

The political and military climate had definitely changed one hundred years later in the 5th century BCE. The struggle for Greece was real as far as Athenians saw it, and the threats did not only come from outside the borders but from internal city-states unhappy with Athens' rules. At the Battle at Marathon in 490 BCE, the Athenian army finally overpowered the Persians, who they had been battling for years, forcing them to retreat back across the Aegean Sea. Some scholars have pointed out that the Amazon myths may have been a mythical paradigm, accounting the martial struggles throughout time with the Persians. The representation of these myths on public buildings would have celebrated the values of order and self-control which had enabled Greeks to withstand the onslaught of barbarian invaders.¹² The first thing to note about the Amazons is that they are women and that their homeland is outside of Greece's borders.¹³ Not only are they an abomination, they are a foreign abomination, their sheer existence is a defiance of Greek society.

Meanwhile, the city-state of Sparta along with its allies became overwhelmingly dismayed with Athens captain position at the helm of the empire. Sparta rose up in 431 BCE in what would be the beginning of the Peloponnesian Wars, while the construction of Bassai in Arkadiadid not began until 429 BCE. Arkadia was under Athenian influence even though it was in close proximity to Sparta. This could be the initial brick in the foundation of why the frieze at Bassai portrays Penthesilea as a beseeching, defeated foe to Achilles' domineering show of strength as the ultimate warrior, defending Greece against all who wanted to break down the empire. "At Bassai these stories are set in stone and justify the claim of the hillside shrine to belong to the wide world of Greek culture, fit to take its place alongside the proudest marble monuments of any city anywhere."¹⁴ This projection of the Greeks as an unstoppable military force would have echoed an immense war cry straight from Athens to all of Arkadia.

¹² Blundell, *The Sacred and the Feminine in Ancient Greece*, p. 55.

¹³ Tyrrell, *Amazons: A Study in Athenian Mythmaking*, p. 56.

¹⁴ Beard, *Classics: A Very Short Introduction*, p. 77.



Figure 1. British Museum number 1815,1020.21

The artists responsible for these images may have lent their own opinions to the stories they were re-telling. Let us consider Iktinos, the supposed architect of the Temple at Bassai.¹⁵ He was the most highly regarded architect in all of Athens having just completed the Parthenon a short time before construction started on the Temple of Apollo on Mount Kotilion in Bassai. Assuming that at least some of the trades people working on the Temple would have also been from Athens, there would have been quite a presence of Athenian culture in the impoverished and remote area of Arkadia, known for its contributions of men to fight in Greek battles. Exekias, the amphora artist, also hailed from Athens, but at a time when Athenian rule held an umbrella for democracy and expansion, his pottery eventually made it all the way to Italy.¹⁶ The influence of Athens seemed borderless, but plenty of foreigners, and even some fellow Greeks, wished to stamp out its wide spread impact.

¹⁵ Cooper, *The Temple of Apollo Bassitas*, vii.

¹⁶ The British Museum, collection online. Penthesilea Black Figure Amphora.



Figure 2. British Museum number 1836,0224.127

We may never know what qualities the Amazons possessed that truly drove the Greeks to keep constant reminders of them. Was it the idea that women could be skilled fighters with little to no need for male participation in their society? Did the notion of foreign invasion and the loss of lives become daily observation so as to keep the people of Greece on the defense? This vase painting would have invoked recognition of the heavily armed foreigners that encircled Greece like sharks ready to rip off chunks from the empire. Evenly matched battles would have sometimes lasted for years, as with the case of the Trojan War, until a victor could whittle down his opponent and stake claim to greatness. By the time of construction of the temple at Bassai we see these illustrations of struggle manipulated into the blatant Greek sided domination of all that stand in the way of Greece in many public art displays leading us to have little choice but to assume that this display evoked self-elevation among Greece's military and civilians. It is with this scheme in mind that Greek sculptors may have set out to rid the empire of the memory of damage done by the Amazons to Greek troops by portraying them as inferior to the feared warriors they were depicted as in legends.

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