

BOOK REVIEW

The Amazons: Lives & Legends of Warrior Women Across the Ancient World. By ADRIENNE MAYOR. Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014. Pp. vii + 519. Hardcover, \$29.95. ISBN 978-0-691-14720-8.

Amazons: just reading the name conjures up images in our minds. Where did these images come from? For most classicists and ancient historians, the answer has been the imaginations of ancient Greek artists and authors. Mayor challenges this answer and takes us on a journey from Greek *poleis* through Asia Minor and the Caucasus region into India, even as far as China. Mayor's goal is to demonstrate that the legends many of us learned were created by the Greeks are really their spin on other cultures' tales and historical figures.

Mayor criticizes standard interpretations of Amazons by saying that they only look at the legends' Greek origin. There have been numerous articles and books that do limit their examinations of the Amazons to a legendary or mythic trope, as a means to understand the Greeks and their view of their world. If the classicists that Mayor criticizes have an agenda in how they are reading texts and images about Amazons, Mayor herself has two: to prove that the Amazons were real, and to show that a great deal of cross-cultural knowledge is reflected in the Greek tales and images.

To prove that there were real Amazons would be quite wonderful. However, even though Mayor documents texts, grave goods, objects, and oral stories from around the area she is focused on, she tries to show direct influence between other cultures' stories about warrior women and Greek stories about Amazons, which is often difficult to prove. The best we can do is show familiarity and similarity, and in this Mayor does an admirable job.

Mayor paraphrases several non-Greek texts without quoting from them, such as a Caucasus legend about the Narts and the Central Asian *Manas* epic. However, we really need to see the actual passages, not simply because most of us are not familiar with them but also to learn whether

they really use the term “Amazon.” This is important, because while the ancient Greeks saw the Amazons as a historical people, they differentiated between them and other nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples where women were also warriors. The ancient Persians, Egyptians, and others also used the word “Amazon” to talk about a distinct people. Yet for Mayor to call a people “Amazons,” it is good enough for them to have women warriors, hunters, or horsewomen and live in the area she is looking at. When we as scholars use the term “Amazon” to refer to any woman who is a warrior, hunter or leader, we lose sight of what Amazons meant to the ancient cultures that used the name.

Aside from potential confusion over who was or was not Amazon, there is a lack of chronological proof. As a historian, not a classicist, I want to see an understanding of the inevitable changes over time and as much evidence as possible to support any influences. Clearly as the Greeks learned about women warriors among those whom they viewed as barbarians, their legends changed, as did their representations of them. Mayor tries to show these influences in several ways but not in as direct a chronological fashion as I hoped.

First, she attempts to show unquestioned stories about Amazons as proof that different cultures report the same tale, for example by laying out several variations of the Penthesilea and Achilles legend (Mayor p 302-304). However she only gives dates for a few of the sources, which range from a lost work of Stesichorus in the 7th century BCE to the mid-12th century Byzantine *Etymologicum magnum* and are laid out as if they are all of equal value, even though the societies in which these works were created varied quite a bit.

Secondly, she directs our attention to various archaeological finds of women warriors. How can grave goods from the 6th or 5th centuries BCE show direct influence on stories and images of Amazons created by Greeks in the 7th century BCE? Yes, Mayor does detail a few older finds, but these, like the excavation at Semo Awtschala (73) or the Golden Warrior (76) are dated between 1200-1000 BCE. It would not be easy to demonstrate a connection between Greek stories and such early people in Georgia or China, and merely mentioning these discoveries is not proof of contact between cultures.

Similarly, Mayor finds stories of Amazon-like figures in other cultures as if their existence proves some real Amazon people. But how does discussing stories from other cultures not written down until the common era, such as Ferdowsi's *Shahnama* from the 10th century, prove influence on Greek, Roman, Persian, or even Egyptian writing that is centuries older? I really wanted to see these tales laid out alongside the Greek stories to demonstrate lines of influence and reimagining. There may be a strong case for specific tales or associations, but in this book those are not shown as clearly as they could be.

While the hunt for warrior women is certainly providing us with a clearer view of human history and variations in its societies, it should not reject the role of the storyteller or artist in the Greek world. Mayor highlights changes in stories about the same encounters between heroes and Amazons. She also discusses and shows changes in Amazon clothing and weapons in art and literature. However, she does not lay these changes out in a chronological fashion, so the reader may struggle to see trends or historical influence as clearly as I think they could be shown. For example, questions about why different authors differ on details and tone in the legend of Hippolyte are valid (Apollodorus, *Library* 2.5.9 or Diodorus 2.46.4, 4.16), but we should not treat those authors as sharing the same purpose or drawing from the same information pool, especially when many of their sources exist only in fragments (such as Ctesias). The lives of authors and artists impacted their work; we must therefore consider this context more intensely than Mayor has.

Mayor's focus on finding "Amazons" is not new. Herodotus reported on them as a historical people, as did several other ancient and medieval writers whom Mayor cites. But searching for historical "Amazons" does not necessarily mean that you are looking to value women warriors. 19th-century scholars routinely tried to use the Amazons to demonstrate the idea of a once-matriarchal world, in order to support their patriarchal one. The Greeks themselves used Amazons for different reasons over the centuries. But ancient writers claiming to discuss a historical people did not report identical accounts. A historical Amazon people might have existed, but if so we have not found them. Perhaps in time, archeology may discover early enough graves to demonstrate a viable matriarchal people or even

more nomadic groups with female warriors than the few Mayor recounts in chapter four. Then we could compare such evidence to the earliest visual and textual evidence. Right now, Mayor's connections are intriguing but not undisputable, so we need to continue to use cross-disciplinary approaches to assess all evidence.

Understanding the past shouldn't be about proving one interpretation or methodology superior to another. We get closer to the past by being open to all the evidence and by using different approaches to understanding it. The Amazons are a topic much larger than one book could realistically tackle. Mayor's approach is one more valid way of examining the Amazons of the ancient world. She gets us one step closer to understanding just how complex human interactions and views of the world have always been.

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