

The Amazons of the Americas: between myth and reality

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For many of those travelling to the New World, the Amazons would have represented one of the great enigmas of their time. Encounters with these tribes of warrior women and descriptions of their lifestyle featured heavily both in classical mythology and in contemporary novels, but much about them was shrouded in mystery.¹ In this article I shall attempt to shed light on how Europeans perceived these “Amazons”, drawing on sources both prior to and after Christopher Columbus’s “discoveries”. I will also examine the role played by the indigenous population in creating (or perpetuating) these myths.

The earliest reports of encounters with the Amazons come from classical Greek literature, in the works of Herodotus, Strabo and Diodorus Siculus.² These works were accessible to the majority of the Western European population as legends transmitted orally, and would undoubtedly have also influenced a select number of literate readers throughout the centuries – most importantly, the authors of fourteenth and fifteenth-century literary works portraying the Amazons, such as Sir John Mandeville and Garci Rodríguez de Montalva.³ There are in fact many noticeable similarities between these accounts: both Herodotus and *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* place the Amazons in the Near East, next to or close to ancient Scythia;⁴ both also place great emphasis on the Amazons’ ability in combat and their self-proclaimed separateness (see Herodotus, “We could not live with your women; for we and they do not have the same customs”; Mandeville, “they will suffer no men amongst them”), and both are clearly fascinated by their sexual habits.⁵

¹ Herodotus, Strabo and Diodorus Siculus all mention them in their works. In later works the Amazons were often presented in a mythological context, interacting with the likes of Hector and Aeneas (see Benoît de Sainte-Maure, *Roman de Troie*, or Boccaccio, *Teseide*). They also feature heavily in works such as Mandeville’s *Travels* and Montalva’s *Sergas de Esplandan*.

² Herodotus, *The Histories*, 4.110.1-4.118.1

<http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0016.tlg001.perseus-eng1:4.110.1>, (10/11/2012); Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca Historica*, 2.2.44-2.2.46,

http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Diodorus_Siculus/2B*.html, (10/11/2012); Strabo, *Geographica*, 5.0-5.4, <http://rbedrosian.com/Classic/strabo11b.htm>, (10/11/2012).

³ See John Mandeville, *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, <http://www.romanization.com/books/mandeville/>, chapter xvii, (10/11/2012); Garci Rodríguez de Montalva, *Las Sergas de Esplandian*, (Madrid: Editorial Castalia, 2003).

⁴ A Central Eurasian region, today encompassing parts of Ukraine, Central Asia and Eastern Europe.

⁵ Herodotus, *The Histories*, 4.110.1-4.118.1; Mandeville, *Travels*, chapter xvii.

Violence, of course, is implicit in the very name of “Amazon”, whether we interpret it as deriving from the Iranian “ha-mazan” (warrior), “ama-jamah” (virility-killing) or the Greek “α-μαζος” (“without breast”, a reference to their supposed tradition of amputating one breast in order to handle weapons with greater ease).⁶ There are however some differences between the classical and fourteenth-century portrayals of these women. While Herodotus portrays them as more sexually passive, but undoubtedly astute and worthy opponents in battle, Mandeville paints the portrait of sexually aggressive women, who, though “right good warriors” and “noble”, are also far more brutal and even “out of their wits” – an example, perhaps, of the mix of fascination and fear these women were meant to evoke in the readers’ minds.⁷

Although there are many doubts regarding the identity of “Sir John Mandeville” (possibly a pseudonym for a French writer, Jean à la Barbe, or a Fleming, Jan de Langhe⁸) and even more regarding his motives,⁹ the vivid, detailed descriptions are a recurring element of his work. They have been used either to flesh out tales of classic mythological creatures (from animals like the phoenix, to monsters such as the Cyclops and ambiguous figures like the Amazons), to add detail to Biblical scenes (the land of Job, Jerusalem) or to add veracity to uniquely Mandevillian creations.¹⁰ These tales would definitely have had a profound impact on readers, stimulating their imagination and desire to travel. This is, of course, particularly significant as this was one of the books that most benefited from the invention of the printing press and was widely read throughout Europe by an audience completely new to this hobby, and, crucially, one that was used to believing the absolute truth represented by the printed word.¹¹

Another fascinating view of the Amazons is given by their representation in medieval maps, from the Henry of Mainz map (circa 1110) to the 1290 Hereford Map and the 1380 Catalan Atlas – a clear image of the geographical and symbolic position these women held in

⁶ George Hinge, “Herodot zur skythischen Sprache. Arimaspen, Amazonen und die Entdeckung des Schwarzen Meeres”, *Glotta* 81 (2005), 86–115; “Amazon”, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/18672/Amazon> (07/05/2013).

⁷ Herodotus, *Histories*, 4.110.2, 4.113.1, 4.114.1–4.116.1; Mandeville, *Travels*, chapter xvii.

⁸ John Larner, “Plucking Hairs from the Great Cham’s Beard: Marco Polo, Jan de Langhe, and Sir John Mandeville,” in Suzanne Conklin Akbari and Amilcare Iannucci (eds.), *Marco Polo and the Encounter of East and West* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 133–155.

⁹ The work is clearly fabrication, but we cannot know whether it was written as a novel, as a work of satire or even as an “encyclopaedic” volume drawing on previous travel writing.

¹⁰ Mandeville, *Travels*, chapter xvii.

¹¹ Irving Leonard, *Books of the brave: being an account of books and of men in the Spanish Conquest and settlement of the sixteenth-century New World*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 11, 13–15, 23–24.

the European mind. Although there are differences in where exactly the “*regio femarum*” is located (juxtaposed to the Irish “patriarchy”, or just off the Indian coast) there are similarities in how this land is portrayed. In each case it is represented by a warrior queen with sword and/or orb in hand, and more importantly, always on the very edge of the map - often in the company of dog-headed people and cannibals. According to Karma Lochrie, this position signifies the depiction of the Amazons as an “abject race” by cartographers; however, considering the role that legend, classical sources and the imagination played in medieval cartography, it could simply symbolise the mixture of curiosity and fear that characterised views on these unknown lands.¹²

Once we consider these influences, it is perhaps not so surprising that Columbus, a great lover of everything exotic, was “obsessed” with finding the Amazons, assiduously noting down any reference of them he encountered.¹³ Likewise, Cortes’s instructions from Velazquez in 1518 included a point on finding out about “people with large broad ears and others with faces like dogs and also where and in what direction are the Amazons”.¹⁴ In this second case the Amazons were clearly not a top priority – this was the twenty-sixth point from a total list of thirty, far below the key matter of finding the lost conquistadors Juan de Grijalba and Cristobal de Olid – but there can be little doubt that in the Spaniards’ minds the Amazons were real, that there was a genuine chance (however small) of finding them and that there was a great desire to do so.

Perhaps the most detailed account of American Amazons we have is the testimony of Friar Gaspar de Carvajal, who accompanied Francisco de Orellana on his 1541 journey exploring the Amazon.¹⁵ The first reports of “warrior women” come early on in the voyage, first from local tribes who tell of “the existence of the Amazons and of their wealth further down the river”, and then other indigenous groups who claim to be these women’s tributaries.¹⁶ The image that thus emerges – a wealthy, structured empire with fierce warriors and a tribute system – would have been near impossible for the explorers to shake off, as it

¹² Karma Lochrie, *Heterosyncracies: female sexuality when normality wasn't*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 108-110. See also maps reproduced here.

¹³ Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, *Columbus*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 34, 40.

¹⁴ "Instruccion que dio el capitan Diego Velazquez en la isla Fernandina en 23 de octubre de 1518 al capitan Hernando Cortes, etc.," *Coleccion de documentos & ineditos para la historia de Espana* (112 vols., Madrid, 1842-1895), I, 403, quoted in Irving Leonard, “Conquerors and Amazons in Mexico”, *The Hispanic American Historical Review*, Vol. 24, no. 4 (Nov., 1944), p. 573.

¹⁵ Gaspar de Carvajal, “Carvajal’s account” in J.T. Medina, *The discovery of the Amazon according to the account of Friar Gaspar de Carvajal and other documents*, (New York: American Geographical Society, 1934).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 177, 205.

evoked memories of the Aztec and Inca empires they had either seen or heard of. This would have been particularly true for Orellana himself, who had been a close friend (and possibly a relative) of Francisco Pizarro and had served as his lieutenant in Peru.¹⁷ Orellana and his men subsequently became involved in a skirmish with some of these “tributaries”, killing several of the supposed Amazons, and were able to interrogate one of the indigenous prisoners as to their whereabouts and their habits. The vision of the Amazons that emerges is in line with the previous native reports (though of course more detailed) and, just as importantly, with European pre-conceptions: women who live without men, but who would consort with them “when that desire came”, and who were wealthy, beautiful and fierce. They also conform to classical mythology insofar as they have a queen, here given the name Conori.¹⁸

Even at the time, Carvajal and Orellana’s testimonies were dismissed and ridiculed, notably by Lopez de Gómara whose 1552 *Historia general de las Indias* defined these accounts as “full of lies”, and there is no doubt that these sources are heavily flawed.¹⁹ As with most of the source material regarding American Amazons, knowledge of them is obtained via the natives, often through the coercion and aggressive interrogation of prisoners (hardly reliable testimony). The issue of translation instantly arises: Carvajal speaks of Orellana having a “list of words”, though whether he would have been able to put together an extensive glossary in just a few days is open to debate.²⁰ We can also see a clear pattern emerging as, almost unanimously, the natives tell the Spaniards of great riches and kingdoms to be found (not just of the Amazons) “further down the river”, just a little “further inland”: it is not too difficult to deduce that the natives’ motives might have been a simple desire to get rid of the Spaniards, by sending them elsewhere in search of gold.²¹

On the other hand, it is worth noting that contemporary critics such as Gomara were also often considered highly dubious sources, especially those who had never been to the Americas. Carvajal and Orellana, on the other hand, were travelling down the previously unexplored Amazon River. They had no idea how long their voyage might take or where they would end up, and were almost entirely ignorant of the climate, flora, fauna and inhabitants

¹⁷ J.T. Medina, “Biography of Orellana”, in *Ibid.*, 36, 39.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 221.

¹⁹ Francisco López de Gomara, quoted in Medina, *Discovery of the Amazon*, 25-26.

²⁰ “In this stopping-place the Captain took [aside] the Indian who had been captured farther back, because he now understood him by means of a list of words that he had made, and asked him of what place he was a native[.]” Carvajal, “Carvajal’s account”, in *Ibid.*, 219.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 203, 210, 220.

of the area.²² It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that they clutched at any evidence of familiarity, be it rumours of an Aztec- or Inca-style wealthy empire or the mythical Amazons. It is also worth noting that by 1541 the Amazons had made a very significant appearance in literary culture. They featured heavily in “Las sergas de Esplandan”, a sequel to the Amadis of Gaul cycle, first published in 1510 and widely circulated: these “women warriors” were becoming further embedded in the European imagination.

When we consider accounts from explorers such as Columbus, Carvajal and Cortés we can therefore see not only a belief in the Amazons but also a genuine desire to find them. This was undoubtedly at least in part linked to economic matters, particularly in the case of Cortes, whose only mention of the Amazons comes in his fourth letter to Charles V,²³ at a low point in the expedition’s fortunes. In Cortes’s mind, at least, a mention of the Amazons, even as feeble as his (not a direct sighting, but merely a report from a captured native), might just keep the king’s interest and Cortes’s hopes of sponsorship alive – especially when one considers Charles V’s devotion to the romances of chivalry.²⁴ Similar issues must have also been in the other explorers’ minds as well, accompanied by the thought that discovering the kingdom of the Amazons would ensure sponsorship from Europe and also draw more people to this new land of riches and legendary creatures. In Carvajal’s account in particular, we must also consider that this account of the Amazons might be among other things a justification – killing women in battle might be shameful, but if they turned out to be the ferocious Amazons it would become an act of great valour²⁵

Another important aspect to consider is to what extent the Amazons were a male fantasy – let us not forget that all accounts of these women are written by men, often just off the back of a long sea voyage on which no women were present. It is perhaps not so surprising that these men tell tales of noble, tall, wealthy and beautiful women, fierce in battle and sexually aggressive, with no interest whatsoever in marriage. Over the centuries it is interesting to note just how much more emphasis the likes of Benoit de St Maure, and Mandeville place on the sexual relations of the Amazons being born “not out of duty, but joyfully”.²⁶ Yet another characteristic of the Amazons, present from the myths of Hercules and Penthesilea, Theseus and Hyppolita right down to Esplandian and queen Calafia, is that

²² Ibid., 10.

²³ Hernán Cortés in Pagden (ed.) *Letters from Mexico*. (New York: Grossman, 1971), 282-337.

²⁴ Leonard, *Books of the Brave*, 19-20.

²⁵ A. Wettan Kleinbaum, *The War against the Amazons*, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1983), 1

²⁶ Benoit de St Maure, quoted in Lochrie, *Heterosyncracies*, 118; Mandeville, *Bodley Version of Mandeville’s Travels*, 85: the Amazons visit men “whan they lestyn to haue bodily lykyng of hem”.

the Amazon, no matter how powerful or skilled in battle, always falls in love with (and bends the knee to) the hero. In the mind of these travellers therefore, to win an Amazon was “to be certified a hero”.²⁷

It would, however, be one-sided at the very least to consider this image of the Amazons wholly European. Let us not forget that it was the natives of the Caribbean who told Columbus of the island of Matinino, the natives of the Mesoamerican mainland and the Amazon basin who told Velasquez and in their turn Orellana and Carvajal that the Amazons existed “just a bit further inland”. Steverlynck, in particular, argues that the image of the Amazons was created through a “dialogue” between natives and Europeans.²⁸ We can see how Columbus’s account of the women of Matinino reflects the local myths about the culture hero Guahayone and the origin of the Taino people.²⁹ In the case of Carvajal’s account, the prisoner’s testimony is full of references that Enrique de Gandia attributes to the informant’s knowledge of Inca culture, such as the references to woollen clothes, worship of the Sun, et cetera.³⁰ However, the association with the Incas might have been made by Carvajal independently, based on his experience of Inca and Amerindian culture. Yet another important aspect is the fact that in some American tribes – namely the Manoa and some Omagua groups – long, braided hair was customary, and this might have given the fighters a feminine appearance.³¹

We can conclude, therefore, that European views of the Amazons were greatly influenced by their representation in classical mythology, contemporary mythology and pictorial representations, particularly in cartography. Early explorers and travellers of this period manifested a clear and, we can suppose, genuine desire to find these women, as a discovery of this kind would have ensured the riches, the sponsorship of expeditions and the glory they dreamed of, while also offering the opportunity of sex without any strings attached. As we have shown, the native people did contribute to perpetuating the myth of the presence of a tribe of “warrior women”. The obstacle posed by language, however, was key: and the faulty communication of this early period must therefore lead to the conclusion that, despite native input, the Amazons were largely a European creation, shaped by their preconceptions and interests.

²⁷ Wettan Kleinbaum, *The War against the Amazons*, 1.

²⁸ Astrid Steverlynck, “To what extent were amazon women facts, real or imagined, of Native Americans?” *Ethnohistory*, 2005, Vol.52(4), 689.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 689-690.

³⁰ Enrique de Gandia, *Historia critica de los mitos de la conquista Americana*, quoted in *Ibid.*, 694.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 694, 693-695.

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