

Athenian Amazoneion and Amazonomachy in Plutarch's Life of Theseus*

[L'Amazoneion di Atene e l'amazzonomachia nella
Vita di Teseo di Plutarco]

by

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Abstract

In the description of the battle that the Amazons fought against the Athenians in Athens, Cleidemus and Plutarch state that the left wing of the invaders' formation stood next to the so-called *Amazoneion*. Based on the assumption that this toponym refers to the Amazons' camp on the Areopagus hill, scholars have interpreted the description of the battle as confused and hard to understand. This problem can be resolved under the assumption that the *Amazoneion* was the monument of a fallen Amazon in the sanctuary of the Olympian Gaia.

Key-words: Cleidemus, Amazons, Pnyx, Olympeion, Topography, Antiope.

Riassunto

Nella descrizione della battaglia che le Amazzoni combatterono contro gli Ateniesi ad Atene, Clidemo e Plutarco affermano che l'ala sinistra dello schieramento delle invasori si trovava accanto al cosiddetto Amazoneion. Partendo dal presupposto che questo toponimo si riferisca all'accampamento delle Amazzoni sull'Areopago, gli studiosi hanno interpretato la descrizione della battaglia come confusa e poco comprensibile. Questo problema può essere risolto ipotizzando che l'Amazoneion fosse il monumento di un'Amazzone caduta nel santuario di Gaia Olimpia.

Parole chiave: Clidemo, Amazzoni, Pnice, Olympeion, Topografia, Antiope.

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Plutarch's *Life of Theseus* (27-8) contains a narration about the Amazons' conquest of Athens followed by a battle in which the Athenians prevailed after a long struggle. Although the symbolic value of this war was important enough to provide a subject for the sculptural decoration of the Parthenon, there is no reason to think that the narration contains even a grain of truth. Nevertheless, as with many Greek myths, the story was set against the background of a real cityscape. This means that the storytellers' fantasy was shaped by and contributed to the shaping of the urban tissue. This is why the story, fictional as it is, makes sense only when read against the backdrop of its physical setting. The converse is also true; some of the misunderstandings that surround the story of the Athenian Amazonomachy have led to mistaken reconstructions of the topography of the city.

In this note, I argue that the scholarly reconstructions of the battle have been conditioned by a misidentification of the *Amazoneion*, a monument next to which the left wing of the Amazons' line was deployed¹. Here is the crucial passage in which Plutarch paraphrases the description of the battle by Cleidemus (323 F 18):

ιστορεῖ δὲ Κλείδημος, ἑξακρι-
βοῦν τὰ καθ' ἕκαστα βουλόμενος,
τὸ μὲν εὐώνυμον τῶν Ἀμαζόνων

κέρας ἐπιστρέφειν πρὸς τὸ νῦν
καλούμενον Ἀμαζόνειον, τῷ δὲ
δεξιῷ πρὸς τὴν Πνύκα κατὰ τὴν
Χρῦσαν ἤκειν. μάχεσθαι δὲ πρὸς
τοῦτο τοὺς Ἀθηναίους ἀπὸ τοῦ
Μουσείου ταῖς Ἀμαζόσι συμ-
πεσόντας, καὶ τάφους τῶν πεσόν-
των περὶ τὴν πλατεῖαν εἶναι τὴν
φέρουσιν ἐπὶ τὰς πύλας παρὰ
τὸ Χαλκῶδοντος ἡρώιον, ἃς νῦν
Πειραικὰς ὀνομάζουσιν. καὶ ταύ-
τη μὲν ἐκβιασθῆναι μέχρι τῶν
Εὐμενίδων καὶ ὑποχωρῆσαι ταῖς
γυναιξίν, ἀπὸ δὲ Παλλαδίου καὶ
Ἀρδηττοῦ καὶ Λυκείου προσ-
βαλόντας ὥσασθαι τὸ δεξιὸν αὐ-
τῶν ἄχρι τοῦ στρατοπέδου καὶ
πολλὰς καταβαλεῖν.

Kleidemos, wanting to describe each individual detail precisely, relates in his history that the left flank of the Amazons faced the place now called the *Amazoneion*, and on the right they approached the *Pnyx*, beside the *Chrysa*. Against this wing the Athenians fought with and fell upon the Amazons from the *Mouseion*; the tombs of the fallen are on both sides of the street heading towards the gate beside the heroön of *Chalkôdon*, which they now call *Peiraika* gate. On this side, [the Athenians] were defeated and gave way to the women as far the [the sanctuary] of

¹ For a recent bibliography on the *Amazoneion*, see note 5. On the passage, see especially JACOBY in *FGH*: *ad loc.*; MORISON in *BNJ* *ad loc.*; TUCI 2024: *ad loc.*

the Eumenides, but those attacking from the Palladion and Ardettos and the Lyceum pushed back their right flank up to their encampment and slew many.

[text and translation BNJ]

The Amazons' formation is said to have extended from the *Amazoneion* on the left flank towards the sanctuary of Chryse at Pnyx on the right. Neither of these two places has been identified archaeologically; however, we know where the Pnyx is. From what follows in the text, we learn that the right wing of the Amazons was attacked by the Greeks arriving from the Mouseion, which is clearly the Hill of the Muses, today more commonly referred to as Philoppapou Hill. This means that the Amazons were facing south. This much can be taken for granted.

The other end of their formation is widely believed to have extended towards Areopagus (see the map below). This is because Cleidemus says

it stretched as far as the *Amazoneion*. The same word was used by Diodorus (4.28.2), who stated that the *Amazoneion* was the encampment of the Amazons². Given that Aeschylus (*Eum.* 685-90) and Apollodorus (*Epit.* 1.16) say that that camp was on the Areopagus, scholars have traditionally assumed that this was the location of the *Amazoneion*. This is certainly plausible in itself; however, the assumption that the left wing of the Amazons' line stretched to the Areopagus renders Cleidemus' narration profoundly confusing.

Let us consider the traditional interpretation of the fragment. The passage between the rocky outcrops belonging to Pnyx and Areopagus in its narrowest part is not much more than one hundred meters in width, and it can be thought of as a vantage position for troops that intended to cut the enemy's access to the area behind it. It is, however, hard to understand why the Amazons would decide to defend themselves in this narrow

² κατήστησαν εἰς τὴν Ἀττικὴν, καὶ κατεστρατοπέδευσαν ὅπου νῦν ἐστὶ τὸ καλούμενον ἀπ' ἐκείνων Ἀμαζόνειον (*they came to Attica and they pitched their camp where now there is the Amazoneion called after them*). Apart from Diodorus, three lexica refer to the *Amazoneion*. According to Stephanus of Byzantium (s.v. Ἀμαζόνειον), it was a *place in Attica, where Theseus prevailed over the Amazons* (τόπος ἐν τῇ Ἀττικῇ, ἔνθα Θησεύς τῶν Ἀμαζόνων ἐκράτησεν). It adds nothing to what Plutarch says. According to Harpocration (s.v.) it was a *sanctuary that was founded by the Amazons* (ιερόν ὃ Ἀμαζόνες ἰδρύσαντο). It could have been located on Areopagus, as well as anywhere else in the area controlled by the Amazons. *Suda* (s.v.) apart from the same definition as Harpocration, offers an alternative: Ἀμαζόνειον κέρας. The word κέρας, among several other things, can mean a *wing* of an army. It is thus possible that the compiler had the battle described by Cleitodemos in mind.

passage. Alternatively, the forces could be spread over a slightly wider area on the rugged slopes of the Pnyx, Areopagus, and the passage between them. This line could have extended to around three hundred meters in length. It could make some sense if we imagine that Amazons were lightweight infantry; however, that would be less consistent with their image as horsewomen. Apart from this, in both cases, the enemy would attack them from uphill along what is now Apostolou Pavlou Street. This would render the Amazons' position awkward, unless they guarded the passage to something located behind them, which does not seem to be the case.

The problems do not end here, however. As the battle developed, the right wing of the Amazons overcame the Greeks, who assaulted them from the Mouseion and pushed them towards the sanctuary of the Eumenides. This sanctuary was located close to Areopagus, most likely north-east of it (see Di Cesare in Greco 2010-2015: 221-222). This means that the right wing of the Amazons pushed the enemies beyond their (Amazons') left wing and their camp. After this description of the events

on the right wing, confusing as it is, we would expect the focus to shift towards the left wing³. This is, however, not what we find in the text. Instead, the Greeks attacked from the Palladion, Ardettos, and Lykeion. Thus, for a reason that is not stated in the text, they were deployed on the other side of the Acropolis at a distance of one or two kilometres from the Amazons. From these faraway positions, the Greeks assaulted the Amazons from what was initially the right wing of their (Amazons') formation, who were fighting on their own left flank. These women were pushed to their camp. But what of the left wing? We may only guess whether it played any role in the battle, whereas the right wing was active both on the right and the left and attacked by all the Greek forces. This would be a strange battle description, both in military and literary terms.

There is one more problem. If the positions of the Greek troops mentioned in the text indicate the outline of their line rather than refer to the strongholds kept by their sparse forces, this means that their formation stretched from Lykeion to Mouseion⁴. If so, the Greek line was two or three kilometres long.

³ This is how JACOBY (in *FGH: ad loc.*), who accepted REISKE's textual emendation εὐόνυμον for δεξιόν, understood it. But why would the left wing wait for the men deployed on the other side of the Acropolis at a distance of one or two kilometers to assault them, while the Amazons, from what was initially the right wing of their formation, were fighting on their left flank?

⁴ MAYOR (2014: 272-275) describes the battle such that the Lykeion, Ardettos, and Palladion were places where the Athenian troops were stationed. In this way, she avoids the impression that the Athenian line was many times longer than the Amazons'. However,

If the Amazons occupied a narrow passage between Pnyx and Areopagus, the fight would have resembled a parody of the battle at Thermopylae. It would be tempting to dismiss the description of the battle as a product of a bookish fantasy of its author, who simply failed to realise that the passage between the Areopagus and Pnyx is not a suitable place for a battle. However, both Cleidemus and Plutarch knew the topography of Athens too well to make their fantasy sound as grotesque as it may seem upon its traditional reading. This is a good reason to admit the possibility that the initial position of the Amazons' troops was different than it is usually assumed. Given that the location of the right wing and the orientation of the line are quite certain, the only thing that can be subject to question is the identification of the *Amazoneion* on the left flank of the Amazons' formation as their camp on the Areopagus.

What could the *Amazoneion* be? Certainly, it could have been the Amazons' camp, as Diodorus says, but it could also be anything else related to the Amazons. Plutarch (*Thes.* 27.5) himself

refers to a place around which some Amazons were buried in Chalcis as *what is now called the Amazoneion* (τὸ νῦν Ἀμαζόνειον καλούμενον). By the same token, the *Amazoneion* in Athens could be a place where one or several Amazons were commemorated. According to Pausanias (1.2.1), there were at least two such monuments in Athens, one of which was a stele set in the memory of Antiope. The other stele commemorated Molpadia, an Amazon who killed Antiope in battle and who was subsequently killed by Theseus. Plutarch (*Thes.* 27.4) mentions both women, as well as a stele that commemorated one of them (it is not immediately clear which one): τὴν στήλην τὴν παρὰ τὸ τῆς Ὀλυμπίας ἱερὸν ἐπὶ ταύτῃ κεῖσθαι (*the stele next to the sanctuary of the Olympian Gaia was set in her memory*). Although the way he refers to it suggests that its original meaning might have required explanation, the stele itself was a well-known landmark. It is a good candidate for the *Amazoneion* that Cleidemus speaks of⁵.

Unfortunately, it has not been identified archaeologically, and the

it is difficult to reconcile this view with the fact that Plutarch/Cleidemus begin with the description of the Amazons' line, which presupposes a pitched battle.

⁵ The connection between the monuments of the fallen Amazons and the *Amazoneion* has been considered briefly by MARCHIANDI (in GRECO 2010-2015: 374), who admits the possibility that it was located somewhere in the south-east part of the city. TUCI (2024: 268, n. 23) acknowledged this in a footnote, but he preferred the traditional reading of the material advocated by MCINERNEY (1994: 29-31) and THOMAS (2019: 325), which may be more interesting from a symbolic point of view at the cost of ignoring topography. Among more recent scholars, MAYOR (2014: 272-275), MORISON (in BNJ: *ad loc.*), and THOMAS (2019: 325) ignored MARCHIANDI's hypothesis altogether.

location of the sanctuary of the Olympian Gaia has been a matter of conjecture. It is referred to by Thucydides (2.15.4) as one of the sanctuaries in the Ilissos area, which is consistent with Pausanias' (1.18.7) statement that it was in the precinct of the Olympian Zeus⁶. If so, we can imagine that the Amazons' left wing reached thus far. This is consistent with the notion that the right wing of the Amazons on the Pnyx was attacked from Mouseion, which suggests that they were facing south. The left flank would be somewhere in the Hadrianic temenos of Zeus, whereas the right wing would reach Pnyx, perhaps beyond the place where the church of Aios Dimitrios Loumbaridiaris is now. This formation would be deployed on an almost perfectly straight line along the modern Dionysiou Areopagitou Street, and could be 1000-1500 metres long. The women would thus occupy a vantage position, with the Acropolis behind them and the terrain relatively gently sloping downwards in front of them.

The battle on the Amazon's right wing would follow a changing fortune. First, the Greeks attacking from the vantage position on the hill of the Muses

would push them back as far as where the Piraeus Gate was located later. There would be some fierce fighting there, and several fighters would fall⁷. Then, the Amazons prevailed in this area and pushed the Greeks towards the sanctuary of the Eumenides under the east slope of Areopagus. We may imagine that this is where the men managed to resist, finding support in the rocky terrain. The right wing of the Greeks was more successful. Stretching as far as Lykeion, it outflanked the Amazon troops. This is why soldiers attacking from this direction could easily go past the Acropolis and engage with the Amazons from the right wing, who were assaulting the men close to the sanctuary of the Eumenides. These Amazons withdrew to their camp on the Areopagus. In this context, the lack of explicit references to the Amazons' left wing does not come as a surprise. It goes without saying that it was less successful than the forces opposing it.

This reconstruction allows us to make sense of the deployment of the Athenian army. Given that Plutarch clearly thinks of Athens at the time of Theseus as the area between the

⁶ Although TRAVLOS (1971: 290) suggested a location of the sanctuary of Gaia on the rocky hillock south-west from the temenos of Zeus, MARCHIANDI (in GRECO 2010-2015: 464-465) rightly observed that there are no reasons to dismiss Pausanias' statement, especially in face of the fact that only a part of the Hadrianic precinct has been excavated.

⁷ Apparently, this is what Plutarch means when he refers to the fight at close quarters around the Pnyx and Mouseion (τὴν μάχην συνῆψαν ἐν γῆρῳ περὶ τὴν Πινύκα καὶ τὸ Μουσεῖον). By contrast, in other parts of the battlefield, the Amazons could fight with bows and javelins.

Acropolis and the Ilissos, it transpires that the men's line was formed just outside of the city's boundaries. In other words, the Amazons had taken control of the city. This is also why the two stelai of fallen Amazons were located in this area. Although it is not stated explicitly anywhere, it is reasonable to think that they were believed to have been erected in the places where the women died. According to Pausanias (1.2.1), the stele of Antiope was close to the gate on the road to Phaleron⁸. The other one, as Plutarch says, was in the temenos of the Olympian Zeus. This suggests that these places were thought of as the battlefield.

Returning to the testimony of Diodorus, it is possible that his statement that the *Amazoneion* was the place of the former Amazons' camp was a result of his perfectly natural and plausible guess. It cannot be excluded, however, that Diodorus did not invent it but rather followed an existing tradition, which was separate from that represented by Kleidemus. There would be nothing unusual about it. The existence of more than one branch of a mythical or

onomastic tradition is more than common in the ancient Greek material. There is no reason to dismiss any of these branches as less true than another, as long as we are aware that they may be incompatible with one another.

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⁸ On the controversies surrounding the identification of the gate in question, see THEOCHARAKI 2020: 91, 246-247.

Image



The map copied from CAMP, J.M., *The Archaeology of Athens*. New Haven, London 2021

Red line: the initial position of Amazons' line according to the scholarly tradition

Blue line: the initial position of Amazons' line according to my reconstruction

Yellow line: the initial position of the Athenians' line