



Death of an Amazon

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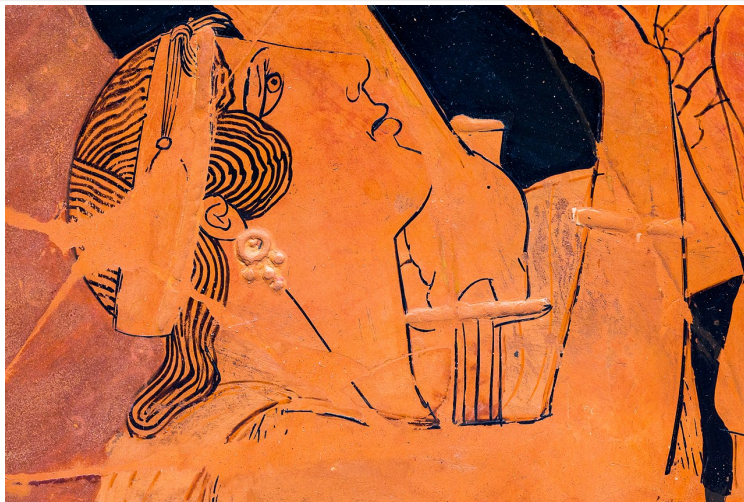
Death of an Amazon

August 14, 2020 Posted By Gregory Nagy listed under [By Gregory Nagy, H24H](#)

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2020.08.14 | By Gregory Nagy

§0. The picture I show for the lead illustration of this essay is a close-up of the face of a dying Amazon. She is Penthesileia, daughter of the war-god Ares. The close-up comes from an ancient Athenian vase painting that pictures this Amazon at the moment of her death, killed by the hero Achilles, with whom she is engaged in mortal combat, one-on-one. And, at this precise moment of death, the Amazon looks up at her killer, Achilles, while he, in turn, is looking down at her. As their eyes meet, Achilles falls in love with Penthesileia, but now it is too late: a fatal wound is about to penetrate the beautiful body of the Amazon. In my book about ancient Greek heroes, I comment on this fatal erotic moment in some detail, arguing that Achilles and Penthesileia are heroic body-doubles of each other—one male and one female. In my essay here, however, I extend my understanding of the description I just gave, “heroic,” since I will argue that Achilles and Penthesileia are not only *epic heroes*. The parallelism between them is deeper, since they are also, both of them, *cult heroes*.



Close-up on the face of Penthesileia. [Image](#) via Wikimedia Commons.



Close-up on the face of Achilles. [Image](#) via Wikimedia Commons.

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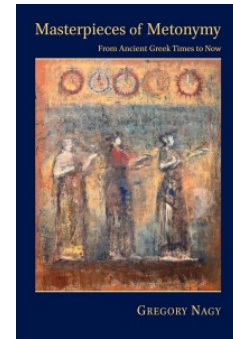
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Achilles killing Penthesileia. Red-figure kylix, 5th century BCE. Munich, Staatliche Antikensammlungen. [Image](#) via Wikimedia Commons.



Line drawing of the painting on the kylix depicted in the photos above. [Image](#) via Wikimedia Commons.

§1. My original argument about the parallelism of Achilles and the Amazon as heroes is presented at §§3–9 of Hour 3 in my book *The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours* ([Nagy, 2013](#), abbreviated as H24H). Here I extend the argument. Although the book highlights evidence showing that Achilles was not only an epic hero but also a cult hero, I did not analyze there the parallel evidence about Penthesileia the Amazon. In this case, the evidence is indirect, to be found in ancient references to other Amazons who are explicitly described as cult heroes.

§2. I start with the reportage of an ancient Greek traveler named Pausanias, who lived in the second century CE. Near the very beginning of his reported travels, as he enters the city of Athens, the first thing he says he sees is the tomb of Antiope, Queen of the Amazons. Here is my translation of the wording used by Pausanias, 1.2.1:

As one enters the city, there is a tomb [*mnēma*] of Antiope the Amazon. This Antiope, Pindar says, was abducted [*harpazein*] by Peirithoös and Theseus, but Hegias of Troizen has created-poetically [*poieîn*] about her such things as I will now tell. Hēraklēs was besieging Themiskyra at [the river] Thermodon, and could not take it, but Antiope, having-conceived-a-passion [*erastheisa*] for Theseus, who was aiding Hēraklēs in his campaign, surrendered the stronghold. These things has Hegias created-poetically [*poieîn*]. But the Athenians assert that when the Amazons came [to attack Athens], Antiope was shot by Molpadia [the Amazon], while Molpadia was killed by Theseus. The Athenians have a tomb [*mnēma*] of Molpadia as well.

§3. I epitomize here the relevant parts of my commentary on this passage, as originally published in [Nagy, 2017.10.19](#), commenting on [Pausanias 1.2.1](#):

I find it most significant that the tomb of Antiope the Amazon should be the very first thing to be seen by Pausanias as he enters the city of Athens. On the symbolism of Athenian myths about a primordial antagonism between Athens and the Amazons, I refer to my analysis in HC 4§§213–215, 4§224. According to one myth, this antagonism was precipitated by the abduction of Antiope, queen of the Amazons, by Theseus, king of Athens. Here are some ancient illustrations of this abduction:



Abduction of Antiope by Theseus. Red-figure kylix (ca. 520–500 BCE). [Image](#) via the British Museum.



Abduction of Antiope by Theseus, with help from Peirithoös (all named in inscriptions). Red-figure amphora by Myson, ca. 500 BCE. Paris, Musée du Louvre, G197.

Euripides Georges Dumézil H24H HAA
travel-study Helen Helen and her Eidolon

Hera Herakles Herodotus

Hippolytus Homer Homeric

epic Iliad Indo-European

Library of Apollodorus Linear B mimesis

Minoan-Mycenaean civilization

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Close-up of the Myson vase. [Image](#) via Flickr under a [CC BY-NC-SA 2.0](#) license.



Abduction of Antiope by Theseus. Colorized cast reconstruction is by Ulrike Koch-Brinkmann and Vinzenz Brinkmann, originally created for the exhibition "Penelope rekonstruiert: Geschichte und Deutung einer Frauenfigur," Museum für Abgüsse Klassischer Bildwerke in Munich, 10 October to 15 December 2006. The original sculpture is from the pediment of the Temple of Apollo at Eretria, ca. 510 BCE, now in the Archaeological Museum of Eretria. [Image](#) via Flickr, under a [CC BY-NC-SA 2.0](#) license.



Abduction of Antiope by Theseus (c. 1600–1601). Adriaen de Vries (c. 1556–1626). [Image](#) via the Royal Collection Trust.

§4. The idea that Antiope then falls in love with Theseus as her abductor, as mentioned by Pausanias here at 1.2.1, is a topic that disturbs—and that needs further investigation. Relevant, I think, is what we read later on at 1.41.7 in the narrative of Pausanias, where he says that he saw in the city of Megara a *mnēma* ‘tomb’ of another Amazon, Hippolyte, who was sister of Antiope. Pausanias says that this tomb was linked with a myth about Hippolyte: how this hero became queen of the Amazons after her sister Antiope was abducted by Theseus, king of the Athenians, and how Hippolyte and her fellow Amazons then went to war against Athens to avenge the abduction. The outcome was a bitter defeat for the Amazons, and most of them perished in the war, but Hippolyte survived and sought refuge at Megara, where she died from her *lupē*. This word *lupē* as used by Pausanias at 1.41.7 can best be translated as the ‘pain’ of mourning.

§5. By combining what we read at 1.2.1 and at 1.41.7 in the narrative of Pausanias, we can piece together a central theme in the overall myth that is linked to the hero cults of the Amazons Antiope, Molpadia, and Hippolyte: that all the pain resulting from the war between the Amazons and the Athenians can be traced back to the primal abduction of Antiope, queen of the Amazons, by Theseus, king of the Athenians. That abduction must have been highlighted in a song of Pindar as mentioned by Pausanias 1.2.1. Classicists track this mention by referring to it this way: Pindar F 175 ed. Maehler. In Pausanias 7.2.6, we read another mention of these Amazons, and Classicists refer to this mention as Pindar F 174 ed. Maehler.

§6. One further word about the references made by Pausanias to Amazons as cult heroes: I deliberately use the word “hero” and not “heroine” in such contexts because I seek to challenge the assumption, common to native speakers of English, that only men are heroes. In terms of ancient Greek hero cults, both men and women could become cult heroes after death, and the wording of Pausanias at 1.2.1 and at 1.41.7 makes it clear that the Amazons Antiope, Molpadia, and Hippolyte were all three considered to be cult heroes.

§7. In Homeric poetry, a prime example of an Amazon as a cult hero is indicated in the wording at *Iliad* 2.811–815, where the tomb of the Amazon Murinē is pictured as the monument of a cult hero: I refer to my comments at [1.02.811–815](#) in *A Sampling of Comments on the Iliad and Odyssey* (Nagy 2017). On Murine as both Amazon and cult hero, I refer again to the original analysis in [Nagy 2017.10.19](#), commenting on [Pausanias 1.2.1](#).

§8. At line 814 of *Iliad 2*, which refers to the *sēma* ‘tomb’ of Murinē, she is pictured as *polu-skarthmos* ‘taking many leaps and bounds’. On the picturing of an Amazon in the act of leaping, I refer to the analysis in [Nagy 2018.01.12](#), commenting on [Pausanias 1.17.2](#).

§9. I epitomize here what is immediately relevant in that analysis:

The traveler Pausanias is making a passing mention at 1.17.2 about the picturing of a famous mythological scene: it is the Battle of the Athenians and Amazons, known in other ancient sources as the *Amazonomakhia* ‘Amazonomachy’. Pausanias at 1.2.1 and at 1.15.2 already makes reference in those earlier passages to the fighting between the Amazons and the Athenians as led by their hero-king Theseus. Here at 1.17.2, Pausanias mentions a picturing of the Amazonomachy by the great Athenian artist Pheidias, contemporary and protégé of the great Athenian statesman Pericles.

§10. For an illustration I show here a close-up of a detail from the Amazonomachy as originally pictured by Pheidias in the fifth century BCE. The artist had metalworked the whole scene of the Amazonomachy into the shield of a colossal statue of Athena that was once housed in the Parthenon on the acropolis of Athens. As for the detail that I am showing here, it comes from the so-called Peiraieus Reliefs, dating from the second century CE, which replicate faithfully what was pictured in the Amazonomachy of Pheidias in the fifth century BCE. We see in this detail a fleeing Amazon whose head is violently jerked backward by a pursuing Athenian who has grabbed from behind the woman's hair, which has come undone and is flowing luxuriantly in the air:



Amazonomachy: an Athenian pursuing an Amazon. 2nd c. CE. Image [via](#).

§11. What we see here in the second picture, which zooms out from the first picture, is beautiful but disturbing. The picturing of the violence inflicted on the woman by the man offends our contemporary sensibilities, but, then again, the whole myth of the Amazonomachy is difficult in and of itself for us to understand.

§12. I find a comparable difficulty in the vase painting that I showed at the start of this essay, where we see the picturing of the Amazon Penthesileia being killed by Achilles—and where the picture is not only aestheticized but even eroticized. Here is another ancient example of such a picture:



Achilles killing Penthesileia. Black-figure amphora, 530–525 BCE. [Image via the British Museum](#)

And here is a modern reworking:



Achilles and Penthesileia. Plaster medallion (1837), by Bertel Thorvaldsen (Danish, 1770–1844). [Image via Wikimedia Commons](#).

§13. In closing, I epitomize what I originally said in my comments (Nagy 2018.01.12) about the death of the Amazon as pictured by Pheidias in his masterpiece of metalwork. To illustrate my epitome, I focus on two pictures. The first picture is a line drawing that reconstructs the world of images that had been metalworked by Pheidias into the convex surface of Athena's Shield. The second picture is a close-up color photograph showing the reconstructed Athena-with-Shield as housed in Nashville, Tennessee. Featured there on the surface of the Shield is the narrative of the Battle of Athenians and Amazons in all their metallic glory. I find it most moving, somehow, to see the ivory fingers of the goddess as they make

contact with the upper rim of her gigantic metal Shield. Both in the line drawing and in the color photograph, you get a good view of Athena's white fingers poised over the action of the battle that is ongoing below. And, if you look closely in both pictures, you can see on the lower right corner of Athena's Shield that striking detail from the Amazonomachy where the beautiful Amazon with the flowing hair, in her stop-motion choreography of death, is forever prevented from leaping forward and reclaiming her freedom from domination by men.



Reconstruction of the Amazonomachy scenes on the exterior of the shield of the Athena Parthenos. Plate 38 of E. B. Harrison, "The Composition of the Amazonomachy on the Shield of Athena Parthenos," *Hesperia* 35 (1966), pp. 107-133. Courtesy of the Trustees of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens.



Shield of Athena Parthenos, Nashville Parthenon, Tennessee.
Image via Flickr, under a [CC BY 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/) license.



Katharine Hepburn in the 1932 Broadway production of *The Warrior's Husband*. [Image](#) via Wikimedia Commons.



Katharine Hepburn as Antiope and Colin Keith-Johnston as Theseus in the 1932 Broadway production of Julian Thompson's *The Warrior's Husband*. For commentary on Amazons in love, see [Nagy 2018.06.14](#). [Image](#) via Tumblr.

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