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# MARKING THE NORTH. THE GREEK TRADITION AND ITS INFLUENCE IN THE ROMAN PERIOD

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# Northern Women in Greek and Roman Thought

Joanna Porucznik

## 1. Introduction

This study aims to demonstrate that the image of northern barbarian women in Greek and Roman traditions was a multi-layered concept that was built over several centuries and included perceptions of peoples living far away from the comfortable and 'civilised' centre of the ancient *oikoumene*.[1] This concept appears to have been influenced by representations of the so-called Other that was based on commonly recognisable ethnic stereotypes and clichés concerning barbarian peoples that had their origin in Greek ethnography.[2] Other ideas that shaped the concept of a northern woman were Greek and Roman gender constructs that were believed to define male and female social roles and activities, both within and outside ancient society.[3] The term 'northern barbarian' that is used in this study pertains to non-Greek and non-Roman societies whose territories were located to the north and north-east of the ancient Mediterranean world. These societies were usually categorised by ancient authors as Germanic, Celtic, Scythian, Sauromatian and Sarmatian tribes.[4] Their geographical location was not without significance. The ancient concept of climatic zones and their impact on peoples' characters was likely to have played an important role in the perception of northern women in Greco-Roman literature.[5] Larissa Bonfante has rightly argued that 'women represented a kind of seismograph of the condition of a civilization or society',[6] meaning that a society that did not recognise the same natural gender categories implied by a civilised people such as the Greeks, was perceived as uncivilised and inferior. Furthermore, women and the barbarians seem to have shared similar characteristics such as cruelty and the lack of self-control (*sophrosyne*, σωφροσύνη), which is clearly expressed in the myth about Orpheus being murdered and decapitated by Thracian women.[7]

It is noticeable that ancient perceptions of barbarian women were heavily based on their otherness that was defined by several factors. The first and most obvious fact

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[1] The northern borders of the known world were a matter of continuous exploration, starting from Herodotus who had nothing to say about the northern limits of the world (Hdt. 4.45.1), Pytheas of Massalia who reached the mysterious isle of Thule (probably the Shetland Isles, the Norwegian fjords or Iceland; Cunliffe 2001, 116–133; on Pytheas, see also Janni 2016, 33 and n. 59 with further literature: moreover, the chapter of Bianchetti in this volume, pp. 43–52) and Augustus who claimed to have sailed across the Ocean and circumnavigated Germania as far as the Cimbrian Peninsula (i.e. Jutland; *RG* 24) (Janni 2016, 33–35).

[2] On the origin of Greek ethnography, the creation of common imaginary views of non-Greeks (including legendary peoples such as Arimaspians and Hyperboreans) and their stereotypes, see Skinner 2012.

[3] For a brief overview on gender constructs in Greek and Roman tradition, see Foxhall 2013.

[4] On the images of the Scythians, Sauromatians and Sarmatians in ancient tradition, see Porucznik 2021, 133–180; on the Germans and Celts, see Chapman 1992; Keyser 2011, 51–52; Cunliffe 2011 and Wells 2011. See also the 'Introduction' to this volume for the discussion on the concepts of 'northernness' and 'barbarian'.

[5] On the Greek concept of *klimata* as narrow strips of land, see Dicks 1955; Marcotte 1998.

[6] Bonfante 2011, 16; for similar observations, see also Saavedra 1999.

[7] Bonfante 2011, 17. Consequently, a man who lacked *sophrosyne* was perceived as a slave to his passions who behaved in a feminine way that was inappropriate for a true man (Foxhall 2013, 84).

is that they were not men. This alone, in the male-oriented Greco-Roman world, was a strong 'othering' factor. Aristotle provides an interesting philosophic approach to gender categories in Greek society. According to the Greek philosopher, women should belong to a separate category of humans, similar to slaves, since they possess no natural ruling instincts and therefore, they should be ruled by men: 'A husband and father rules over wife and children' and '[…] the male is by nature fitter to command than the female, just as the older and full-grown is superior to the younger and more immature.'[8] This seems to correspond well with the legal disability of Greek women who always needed a *kyrios* (*κύριος*), i.e. a guardian (usually their husband or father) to represent their interests in most legal activities including managing contracts and wills.[9]

The second othering factor was the simple fact that barbarian women were non-Greek and non-Roman, which defined their cultural and ethnic otherness. Consequently, they did not follow gender roles generally accepted in ancient society. In his famous passage concerning the disposition of the barbarians, Aristotle mentions that they are inferior to the Greeks, since they do not recognise the natural categories of females and slaves and do not have a natural ruling class. As a result, male-female relationships resemble those between a male slave and a female slave. Therefore, it is natural for the Greeks to rule over them as if the barbarians were slaves.[10]

Notably, barbarian women were often perceived by ancient authors as being less 'female' than Greek or Roman women. It is visible in the written sources that they were strongly masculinised by ancient writers, especially in cases in which barbarian women held power and had control over an army. This conceptual framework – originally Greek and rooted in broader ideas of the East – profoundly influenced Roman writers, who adapted it in their portrayals of Celtic and Germanic women. Such inverted gender categorisation is also visible in numerous mythical representations of Amazons who were imagined as barbarian warrior women. These factors strongly influenced not only ancient imaginary views concerning northern barbarian women, but they have also impacted modern understanding of ancient societies and the role of women, which has resulted in the creation of modern myths, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

The analysed material demonstrates that, whereas Greek authors explained the prominence of northern women through the lens of inverted gender norms and female 'masculinization', Roman writers reinterpreted such figures in moral and social terms. For the Greeks, powerful barbarian women exemplified the disorder and inferiority of non-Greek societies; for the Romans they became vehicles for reflection on virtue, decadence, and the contrast between Roman values and those of the 'barbarians'. In this way, Roman visions were less about biological inferiority and more about moral *exempla*, shaping northern women into mirrors of Rome's own cultural anxieties.

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[8] Arist. *Pol*. 1259a 37 (translation after Lefkowitz & Fant 2016, 64), 1252b 1 (translation after Bonfante 2011, 16).

[9] For an overview of written sources concerning the legal status of Greek women, see Lefkowitz & Fant 2016, 73–117.

[10] Arist. *Pol*. 1252b 2–3. For more ideas of Greek and Roman philosophers on the role of women, see Lefkowitz & Fant 2016, 55–72.

## 2. The East – the world of effeminate men and masculine women

The early ethnographic interests of the Greeks and the importance of Greek overseas settlements and Greek-Persian interactions in the creation of the image of the so-called 'Other' in Greek culture has been analysed on several occasions by authors such as Edith Hall, Beth Cohen, Benjamin Isaac, Erich Gruen, and Joe Skinner.[11] While some scholars focus on the dichotomy between the Greeks and the barbarians,[12] others prefer to point out that such a clear-cut division is too simplistic and somehow unrealistic in a multicultural environment typical of ancient *poleis* (πόλεις).[13] What is common to these studies is that defining Greekness was crucial with regard to defining the Other, whose image is a mental construct based on cultural codes used in visual art and literary *topoi* that reflected ethnic stereotypes which later influenced Roman writers. Various ideas concerning the Northern Other may have had their origin in the East,[14] where inverted gender roles can be identified. The East was perceived in Greco-Roman tradition as a land of wealth, abundance, and luxury, but also as a place of decadence, softness, effeminacy, and the 'natural' slavery of its inhabitants.[15] This provided a perfect setting for the development of the idea of effeminate men and masculine women that became a recurrent theme in Greco-Roman literature.

It is noticeable that Greek and Roman societies were based on the gender binary system, according to which biological sex, male or female, was assigned to individuals at birth and provided the basis for their further gender socialisation.[16] Consequently, a person who was born as a female was expected not only to have a female appearance, but also specific character traits and behaviours that were perceived and generally accepted as female by society. This set of typically female characteristics did not include personal qualities that would normally be expected to be proven by men, such as bravery. Consequently, women who were known to have shown courage were described by ancient authors as behaving 'like men' or 'in a manly way'. An example of this appears in the scene of the death of Olympias, according to Justin's *Epitome of the Philippic History of Pompeius Trogus*:

> She [...] not shrinking from the sword or the blow, or crying out like a woman, but submitting to death like the bravest of men, and suitably to the glory of her ancient race, so that you might have perceived the soul of Alexander in his dying mother.[17]

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[11] Hall 1989; Cohen 2000; Isaac 2004; Gruen 2011; Skinner 2012. For a concise overview of the history of research on the topic, see Porucznik 2021, 25–36 and Lampinen & Forsén 2024 regarding the imaginary representations of the East.

[12] Hartog 1988; Cartledge 1993; Harrison (ed.) 2002; Isaac 2004.

[13] Gruen 2011; Bonfante 2011; Vlassopoulos 2013b.

[14] For ancient stereotypes regarding the East and the 'mirage' of the Orient in Greek and Roman traditions, see Lampinen 2024b.

[15] Lampinen 2024b, 291–300.

[16] Any 'in-between' gendered behaviors and roles were usually perceived as problematic and not 'natural' (Foxhall 2013, 68–69). Gender binarism is still the most commonly used gender classification in modern societies, despite the emergence of the idea of a third gender in Western cultures (Okubo 2017, 401) and among the Lakota Native American Indians, South-East Asian societies, the Balkans, India, Pakistan and Mexico (Kelly & Brown 2017, 404). Examples of modern societies that are traditionally gender plural include the Bugis in Indonesia who have five gender categories and Samoan society that have three gender categories (Okubo 2017, 402–403).

[17] Just. 14.6.11. Translation after Watson 1853.

Notably, both the Greek (*andreia*, ἀνδρεία) and Latin (*virtus*) term for 'courage' are rooted in the word for 'man' (the Greek *aner*, ἀνήρ, and the Latin *vir*), which points out the categorisation of *andreia*/*virtus* as a typically masculine virtue, 'manly courage'/'manliness' which included a set of moral values and behaviours that men could easily demonstrate by being exceptionally skilful in battle.[18] Thus, *andreia*/*virtus* was very rarely attributed to women.[19] On the battlefield, men could show that they were 'real men', thereby achieving status and honour that enhanced their political and communal life.[20] Accordingly, losing a war or a battle was perceived as humiliating and effeminate.[21]

This idea is likely expressed on the famous and oft-discussed Eurymedon vase, on which two figures are depicted: a bearded man wearing only a mantle and holding his half-erect penis in his right hand while reaching forward with his left hand (side A), and an archer in a typical Persian/Scythian outfit who is bent over at the hips with his head twisted toward the viewer while holding his open hands at his face (side B).[22] Dover has suggested that the scene pertains to the Greek victory over the Persians at the river Eurymedon in the 460s BCE and that it 'expresses the exaltation of the "manly" Athenians at their victory over the "womanish" Persians [...]; it proclaims, "we've buggered the Persians!".'[23] Smith also discusses the sexual metaphor behind the scene in which, in her opinion, the archer symbolises the peoples of the East. She points out three different levels of the metaphor: the scene 'reminds the viewer of the submissive position in which Kimon had put Persia in anticipation of the Battle of the Eurymedon; of the immediate outcome of the Battle; and of the consequences of the victory, i.e., that the Athenians then found themselves in a position to rape the Barbarians on the Eastern reaches of the Greek world.'[24]

A similar allusion to the effeminacy of the conquered is visible in Herodotus' description of the naval battle of Salamis that took place in 480 BCE. Artemisia I, Queen of Halicarnassus, who succeeded her husband as ruler upon his death, fought on the Persian side against the Greeks with five ships under her command. Instead of attacking an Athenian ship approaching her vessel, she sank an allied ship to save herself from the Athenians by fooling them into thinking that she was on the Greek side. Herodotus says that Artemisia participated in the war due to her *andreia*. This idea is also expressed in Xerxes' words that are quoted by Herodotus: 'It is said that Xerxes replied: "My men have become women, and my women men".'[25] Artemisia's masculinity was also contrasted

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[18] Foxhall 2013, 87.

[19] van Wees 2004, 39–40. Penrose argues that masculine women (i.e. those who displayed courage, independence and intelligence) were perceived both positively and negatively; however, their pejorative image prevails in Greek sources, since they seemed to have disrupted the natural (i.e. patriarchal) order of society, especially in light of Attic tragedy (Penrose 2016, 24–66).

[20] van Wees 2004, 37–40. Interestingly, Plato in his *Republic* argues that educated women would be able to participate in governing the state (i.e. being part of the 'guardian' class) if they became more like men (and not the other way round), giving up typically female occupations such as mothering (Pl. *Resp*. 451c–452d, 455c, 457a, 458c, 459d; Lefkowitz & Fant 2016, 55–61). For a more detailed discussion on women's *andreia* in Socratic philosophy, see Penrose 2016, 43–47.

[21] Foxhall 2013, 87.

[22] Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg, inv. no. 1981.173.

[23] Dover 1989, 105.

[24] Smith 1999, 139. Taking on 'feminine', passive roles in sexual relationships with other men was also a common motif in depicting anti-hero figures in order to demonstrate their 'degenerate' lifestyle (Foxhall 2013, 89; Williams 2010, 192–214).

[25] Hdt. 8.88.

with the effeminacy of the Phoenicians who fought on the Persian side. This image of a courageous Artemisia is represented in the anonymous *Tractatus de mulieribus claris in bello* when Xerxes gives Artemisia a gift of armour whereas the Phoenician commanders who had served poorly during the battle of Salamis received a present of spindles and distaffs, which were associated with the typically female activity of textile production.[26]

Another example of a barbarian woman holding power is provided by Ada I, Queen of Caria. During the conquest of Alexander the Great, Ada joined forces with the Macedonian king and later adopted Alexander as a son. She was appointed as his satrap in 334/3 BCE and played the fictive role of queen mother, an act which renewed her power but ultimately detracted from her legacy. Arrian in his *Anabasis* (early second century CE) mentions that:

> He [Alexander] commanded Ada, the daughter of Hecatomnus and wife of Idrieus, her brother, whom, according to Carian custom she had married, to be satrap over all of Caria. Idrieus, when he died, had turned affairs over to her. From the time of Semiramis, it had been the custom in Asia for women to rule over men.[27]

This connotation of the barbarians being ruled by women seems to have entered the commonly recognisable barbarian repertoire in ancient literature. It is a recurring motif that can be found in the representations of the Sarmatians (Sauromatians) and Amazons in written sources.

## 3. *Gynaikokratoumenoi* and the Amazons in Scythia

The Amazon motif consisted of a variety of narratives that were developed in Greek tradition over many centuries. The motif was already present in Greek oral tradition. In the *Iliad*, the Amazons, with the Homeric epithet *antianeirai* (ἀντιάνειραι, 'men's equals'), are first mentioned as allies of the Trojans and second, as people from the past that were defeated by Bellerophon in Lycia.[28] The Amazons were described as a tribe of warrior women located in different lands spread across the ancient *oikoumene* including Lycia, Themiscyra on the river Thermodon in Asia Minor, Lake Maeotis in the North Pontic region, and Libya.[29]

The similarity of the visual representation of the Persians, Scythians and the Amazons is not without importance, pointing to the Oriental origin of their visual

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[26] *Tract. de mul.* 13 (Gera 1997, 10). On the chronology of the treatise, see Gera 1997, 60–61 who argues that it was written during the first century CE. For an analysis of written sources regarding Artemisia I, see Cuchet 2015, 240–243.

[27] Arr. *Anab.* 1.23.8 (translation after Penrose 2016, 173). For an analysis of written sources regarding Ada I, see also Cuchet 2015, 235–240. Semiramis' wily rise and manly rulership was described by many writers, e.g. Ctesias of Cnidus (*BNJ* 688 F 1b *ap.* Diod. Sic. 2.4.1–20.3), Deinon of Colophon (*BNJ* 690 F 7 *ap.* Ael. *VH* 7.1; cf. F 1 *ap.* Ath. 13.609a on Amytis); Cephalion of Gergis (*BNJ* 93 F 1b *ap.* Sync. *Chron.* 315–317)

[28] Hom. *Il*. 3.189, 6.186.

[29] For an analysis of the written sources and visual representations that concern the long scholarly tradition of the Amazon myth, see Blok 1995; Penrose 2016, 66–82; Braund 2025, esp. 151–158. For Amazons as Thracians, Scythians and Persians, see Penrose 2016, 95–100.

representations rather than their *ethnos*.[30] According to Herodotus, the Amazons arrived in Scythia after being defeated by the Greeks at the battle near the river Thermodon in Asia Minor.[31] They started to plunder their new land and subsequently came into conflict with the Scythians, who upon discovering that the warriors they were fighting against were female, decided to not kill the Amazons and instead sent a group of young men to establish sexual relationships with them. This resulted in intermarriages between the two groups and the formation of a new tribe called 'Sauromatians' (often used as a synonym for Sarmatians by ancient authors) who inhabited the steppe between the Don and the Volga.[32] Herodotus mentions that the Sauromatian women maintained their old lifestyle and thus they hunted, fought, and rode on horseback in the same manner as men. The Hippocratic treatise *Airs Waters Places* calls the Sauromatians a Scythian race and their women are depicted in a similar way as Herodotus' Amazons: they ride on horses, hunt, shoot, throw the javelin, and can only marry after having killed an enemy.[33] Both sources are roughly contemporary, and it should not be excluded that they are independent of each other and perhaps derived from a common older source. Interestingly, the information of the Hippocratic *Airs* on the Sauromatian women removing their right breasts is absent in Herodotus' story, but it occurs in Hellanicus of Lesbos' contemporary account on the Sauromatian Amazons.[34]

Pliny the Elder mentions in his *Historia Naturalis* that the Sarmatians are divided into a number of tribes including the Sauromatians *Gynaecocratumenoe* who were husbands of the Amazons (*Sauromatae Gynaecocratumenoe, Amazonum conubia*).[35] The term *Gynaecocratumenoe*, which means 'those who are ruled by women', seems to allude to the effeminacy of barbarian men known from the ancient representations of the East. Such stories about the Sauromatians/Sarmatians being ruled by women was one of the catalysts for modern scholars to look for archaeological evidence of women holding a strong position in Sauromatian and/or Sarmatian societies that have often been interpreted as matriarchal. This concept has a long scholarly tradition which is connected with the idea of consecutive waves of nomads migrating from the East, an idea that has recently been thoroughly revised.[36] According to Rostovtzeff, the patriarchal Sarmatians invaded the local tribe of Sauromatians who, despite the invasion, maintained archaic matriarchal traditions in their culture.[37] During the Soviet period, Rostovtzeff's idea was reassessed based on the theory of stages (influenced by Marxist theory), according to which the Sarmatians, being descendants of the matriarchal Sauromatians, represented another stage of the socio-political development of the same archaeological culture; therefore, the Sarmatians remained matriarchal in their culture, exactly as their Sauromatian

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[30] It includes the same elements such as the bow and arrow with a large quiver (*gorytos*, *γωρυτός*), a long-sleeved top (a kaftan), trousers and a pointed hat. Porucznik 2021, 139–142; Skinner 2012, 72–73; Barringer 2004, 115; Gleba 2008; Shapiro 1983; Vos 1963, 40–51.

[31] Hdt. 4.110–117.

[32] On the confusion between the Sauromatians and Sarmatians in written sources and an overview of the archaeological material concerning the so-called 'Amazon' burials in the North Pontic region, see Porucznik 2021, 166–180 with further literature.

[33] [Hippoc.] *Aer.* 17.

[34] Hellan. *BNJ* 4 F 107 *ap.* Tzetz. *Antehomerica* 23 (Schirach, *Carmina Iliaca*, 8).

[35] Plin. *HN* 6.19.

[36] Mordvintseva 2008; *ead.* 2013.

[37] Rostovtzeff 1922.

predecessors.[38] Consequently, female graves containing weapons were used by Soviet archaeologists as ethnic markers to identify the Sarmatian culture in the archaeological material.[39] Soon after, the idea of steppe women being powerful and warlike started to emerge, which was illustrated by the frequent occurrence of weapons and other objects such as horse equipment (interpreted as 'male') in female graves in the Eurasian steppe during various time periods, including the Scythian and Late Scythian cultures, spreading from the mid-eight/late-seventh centuries BCE to the mid-third century CE. Following this idea, weapon finds in female graves of Eurasia started to be perceived as markers of 'female warriors' who were the 'prototypes' of the mythical Amazons.[40]

However, there are several problems with this kind of interpretation of the archaeological material. First, the idea to interpret weapons in female graves as a marker of 'male' identity connected to a warrior status disregards the concept of gender roles applied by steppe populations, roles that may vary from those known and accepted in Greek and Roman society (both of which were strongly male-oriented) due to differing lifestyles and cultural norms.[41] Second, it does not take into consideration the practical use of weapons in the context of a steppe society, in which these objects may have not always been used to express gender identity. There is a variety of possible scenarios as to why weapons could have been deposited in female graves: arrowheads, the most frequent finds in female graves, could be associated with hunting;[42] bows and arrows or daggers may have been used by women as protection against wild animals or robbers during the absence of men;[43] arrowheads in female graves may have also had an apotropaic function, similar to amulets,[44] or they may have symbolised an affiliation of the buried women with warrior (elite) clans.[45] Moreover, a number of women's graves containing weapons from the North Pontic and Volga-Don steppes belonged to young individuals,[46] which may suggest that statuses and social identities could have been applied to children and young people by the living family. In such cases, the weapons deposited in the graves may have never been used by their occupants.

It is also worth pointing out that in times of political instability and war, gender identities may not have been as strictly fixed as they were during more politically stable times. It has been attested in various cultures that at times of conflict women displayed a more masculine identity, or such an identity was attributed to them. An example of this is provided by the *onna-musha*, female samurai who belonged to the *bushi* (warrior) class in

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38 Grakov 1947.

39 Mordvintseva 2008, 60; *ead.* 2013, 210–211; Porucznik 2021, 172 with further literature.

40 E.g. Davis-Kimball 1997a; *ead.* 1997b; Rolle 1989, 86–91; see also Porucznik 2021, 167–168 and 173 with further literature.

41 In her later publication, Davis-Kimball provides examples of modern Kazakh girls who are taught to ride a horse and use the bow and arrow in the same way as boys as part of their upbringing. Also, the gender division of labour in this society is not strict, since both males and females work with wool or manage the herds on horseback (Davis-Kimball & Behan 2002, 36–37, 66; see also the discussion by Penrose 2016, 109–111 with further literature).

42 Hanks 2008, 26; see also Linduff & Rubinson (eds.) 2008.

43 Ivantchik 2013, 82.

44 Ivantchik 2013, 80.

45 For an analogy from the Iron-Age Sagat society in Western Siberia, see Berseneva 2008, 135 and 138.

46 See e.g. the burial of a young girl in Kurgan 13 near the village of Kapulivka (Ilinskaya & Terenozhkin 1983, 177).

feudal Japan. These females were trained in the use of weapons, including the traditional *naginata* polearm as well as daggers and bows, in order to defend their homes, family, and their honour in times of war (which sometimes meant committing suicide before being captured by the enemy). Occasionally, they also participated in battles, evidence for which can be found in Japanese written sources.[47]

Plato in his *Laws* seems to acknowledge the problem of powerless Athenian women who, unlike their Amazon and the Sarmatian counterparts (who are perceived here as two different groups of non-Greeks), would not be able to defend themselves when facing danger. He mentions the Spartan system of female education as a possible but still not ideal compromise that could be applied to educate women:

> You make your girls take part in athletics and you give them a compulsory education in the arts; when they grow up, though dispensed from working wool, they have to 'weave' themselves a pretty hard-working sort of life which is by no means despicable or useless: they have to be tolerably efficient at running the home and managing the house and bringing up children – but they don't undertake military service. This means that even if some extreme emergency ever led to a battle for their state and the lives of their children, they would not have the expertise to use bows and arrows, like so many Amazons, nor could they join the men in deploying any other missile. They would not be able to take up shield and spear and copy Athena, so as to terrify the enemy (if nothing more) by being seen in some kind of battle-array gallantly resisting the destruction threatening their native land. Living as they do, they would never be anything like tough enough to imitate the Sarmatian women, who by comparison with such femininity would look like men.[48]

The myth of barbarian female warriors became a wandering motif that was still vivid in the 16th century when it 'travelled' together with the Spanish colonists to South America and subsequently provided the name for the largest river in the region, the Amazon.[49] Written records reveal that the colonists came across native women who were able to defend themselves during battle and, due to the association with the ancient myth, they started to call them Amazons, which also provided an imaginary link between the Mediterranean and the new continent. They are described as a tribe of warrior women skilled in archery who cut off their right breast in order to become stronger in combat, a detail that is well know from ancient sources.[50] Interestingly, written records also mention that they were braver and stronger than their fellow male Indians,[51] which appears to be a recurring element in ancient descriptions of foreign women, including the aforementioned examples of Artemisia I and Ada I. The colonists also believed that the 'Amazons' possessed an enormous treasure of gold, which is a common ancient motif concerning the edges of the known world.[52] The legend was so strong that during the 17th

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[47] Amdur 1996; Turnbull 2010.

[48] Pl. *Leg*. 806a–806b. Translation after T.J. Saunders (Lefkowitz & Fant 2016, 62).

[49] Marshall 2005, 297–301.

[50] Marshall 2005, 299–300; Hellan. *BNJ* 4 F 107 *ap.* Tzetz. *Antehomerica* 23 (Schirach, *Carmina Iliaca*, 8); [Hippoc.] *Aer*. 17.

[51] A South American 'Amazon' was believed to be as valuable in combat as ten or twelve men (Marshall 2005, 300 with further literature)

[52] E.g. the gold-guarding griffins at the north-eastern edges of the *oikoumene*, mentioned by Aristeas of Proconnesus in his fragmentarily preserved poem *Arimaspea* (Hdt. 4.27): see p. 26 in the 'Introduction' to this volume.

and 18th centuries explorers in South America were still looking for this hidden treasure of gold in the Amazon Forest.[53]

## 4. Celtic women: Boudica and Cartimandua

The image of a 'masculine' barbarian woman, that seems to have derived from the notion of the East as a world where strong women rule over men, certainly influenced ancient perceptions of Celtic communities. This perfectly illustrates how interchangeable and hazy such motifs could appear between 'East' and 'North' and how easily they were transferred between different peoples and areas.[54] A vivid example of this is provided by Boudica,[55] the female leader of the British Celtic Iceni, a group that inhabited the east of England near Colchester during the first century CE. Written accounts concerning Boudica are very scarce and only appear in the works of two classical authors, namely Tacitus and Cassius Dio, neither of whom participated in the events which they describe. Therefore, it is possible that these writers derived most of their material from the same original unknown source.[56] Consequently, the Celtic queen can today be recognised as a literary rather than a historical figure, whose image was intentionally 'modelled' by ancient writers depending on the expected effect on the reader.

According to Tacitus, after the death of Boudica's husband Prasutagus,[57] his kingdom was attacked by Roman centurions who plundered the land. During the invasion, Roman soldiers raped his daughters and whipped Boudica. Eventually, to seek revenge, the Iceni rebelled against the Romans under the leadership of Boudica.[58] Tacitus' father-in-law, Agricola, who became the governor of Britain in 78 CE, would certainly have known about the rebellion and may have provided Tacitus with an eyewitness account of the events. However, even if this did happen Tacitus decided to remain laconic in his description of the events, as if he did not want to engage too much in this matter due to his personal connections with Agricola.[59]

Unlike Tacitus, who wrote his *Annals* only around fifty years after the events in Britain, the Greek historian Cassius Dio prepared his *History of Rome* at the end of the second century CE. His lengthy work survived mostly in the form of epitomes and it is known to be historically inaccurate. Dio is known to have chosen his sources rather uncritically, since he preferred to provide his readers with good entertainment rather than historical precision in his narrative.[60] His account of the so-called Boudican revolt is known only from the 11th-century epitome of John Xiphilinus, therefore we cannot be certain what elements of the narrative were omitted intentionally by Dio and by the author of the epitome itself. The

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53 Marshall 2005, 301.

54 See the 'Introduction' to this volume for a thorough discussion on that subject.

55 Her name undoubtedly derives from the Celtic word *bouda*, i.e. victory. Therefore, the spelling 'Boudica' is the only correct version of her name and not 'Boudicca' or 'Boudouika' as Tacitus and Cassius Dio respectively refer to her. For the correct spelling and different versions of her name attested in manuscripts, including Boudicca and Boadicea, see Webster 2004, 15.

56 Webster 2004, 15–16.

57 A hoard from south-west Norfolk included a silver coin of Prasutagus, see Braund 1996, 133, fig. 32 and 33.

58 Tac. *Ann*. 14.31.

59 Webster 2004, 16.

60 Webster 2004, 16–17.

reasons behind the revolt are different in Dio's account, who points to the confiscation of money that was given to the Iceni by Claudius and a large loan that was provided to them by Seneca.[61] However, the person who is seen as most responsible for the uprising is Boudica, who was described as being more intelligent than was normally expected for a woman:

> But the person who was chiefly instrumental in rousing the natives and persuading them to fight the Romans, the person who was thought worthy to be their leader and who directed the conduct of the entire war, was Buduica, a Briton woman of the royal family and possessed of greater intelligence than often belongs to women.[62]

While Tacitus' Boudica was seen as a noble mother caring for her daughters, Dio's account paints a picture of a vengeful and savage barbarian who murders and pillages her enemies. It is said that she is 'very tall in stature, most terrifying in appearance, most fierce in the glance of her eye, and her voice is harsh', which gives her almost Amazon-like features, as noticed by Adler.[63] Tacitus points out that Boudica's vengeance was in fact justified, since the corrupt Roman soldiers assaulted her both physically and morally, which is expressed in Boudica's speech before the decisive battle against the Romans:

> As Boudica, carrying her daughters before her in a chariot, approached each tribe, she testified that it was of course customary for the Britons to take the field under female leadership; yet now she was not, as one sprung from great ancestors, avenging her kingdom and wealth but, as one of the people, her lost freedom, her body battered by beatings, and the abused chastity of her daughters. The desires of the Romans had advanced to the point where they left no bodies, not even old age or virginity, unpolluted; yet the gods were assisting their justified vengeance: the legion which had dared battle had fallen; the rest were concealing themselves in camp or looking around for flight: they would not bear even the noise and shouting of so many thousands, still less their assault and brawn. If they weighed up within themselves their resources in armed men and their reasons for war, they must conquer in that line or fall. That was the design of a woman; the men could survive – and be slaves![64]

In this passage, one may even sense Tacitus' disapproval of the conduct of the Roman soldiers. As can be assumed, the author decides to include this indirect speech, which was most probably his literary invention, in order to demonstrate that Boudica was morally superior to the corrupt and greedy Roman soldiers.[65] It is not without importance that in her speech, Boudica orders her soldiers to enslave rather than kill the captured Romans, whereas in classical warfare it was generally women who were enslaved, while men were killed.[66] In this speech, Tacitus also alludes to the well-known *topos* concerning

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[61] Cass. Dio 62.2.

[62] Cass. Dio 62.2.2–3. Translation after Cary 1925.

[63] Cass. Dio 62.2.3. See Adler 2008, 189; also the chapter of Gieseke in this volume, pp. 207–208.

[64] Tac. *Ann*. 14.35. Translation after Woodman 2004.

[65] It is highly unlikely that Tacitus knew what was said by a British queen in a foreign language, or that such a speech was indeed delivered to her troops before the battle (Woodman 2004, xvi–xvii). As Bulst presumes, such a sudden outbreak of the revolt may have indeed been caused by the unauthorised actions of Roman officials during the temporary absence of Suetonius Paulinus, who at the time was the *legatus Augusti pro praetore* in Britain (Bulst 1961, 497).

[66] Gillespie 2018. See also Lampinen 2025, 157–159.

the barbarians being naturally prone to be ruled by women, which he makes even more explicit in *The Life of Agricola*, saying that 'they [i.e. Britons] consider no distinction of sex among their rulers'.[67] The Roman commander Suetonius Paulinus, who eventually defeats the Iceni and puts an end to the rebellion, encourages his troops before the battle saying that there are in fact more women than men visible among the barbarian army.[68] After the defeat, Boudica commits suicide by poisoning, a fact that may allude to her 'manly' courage, since she avoids enslavement by the Romans.[69]

Dio also provides the reader with a speech that Boudica supposedly delivered to her fellow Iceni before the battle. In this speech, the queen focuses on the value of freedom and the inferiority of her enemies. She mocks the Romans for their lack of stamina and wisdom on how to survive in the unfamiliar austere North:

> Our opponents, however, can neither pursue anybody, by reason of their heavy armour, nor yet flee; and if they ever do slip away from us, they take refuge in certain appointed spots, where they shut themselves up as in a trap. But these are not the only respects in which they are vastly inferior to us: there is also the fact that they cannot bear up under hunger, thirst, cold, or heat, as we can. They require shade and covering, they require kneaded bread and wine and oil, and if any of these things fails them, they perish; for us, on the other hand, any grass or root serves as bread, the juice of any plant as oil, any water as wine, any tree as a house. Furthermore, this region is familiar to us and is our ally, but to them it is unknown and hostile. As for the rivers, we swim them naked, whereas they do not across them easily even with boats. Let us, therefore, go against them trusting boldly to good fortune. Let us show them that they are hares and foxes trying to rule over dogs and wolves.[70]

In her prayer to the goddess Andraste, Boudica expresses further contempt for the Romans: she alludes to the effeminacy of the Emperor Nero saying that 'though in name a man, he is in fact a woman, as is proved by his singing, lyre-playing and beautification of his person'. The Icenian queen also points out that she 'rules over Britons, men that know not how to till the soil or ply a trade, but are thoroughly versed in the art of war and hold all things in common, even children and wives, so that the latter possess the same valour as the men'.[71] Further criticism of the Roman lifestyle is expressed in Boudica's supplication for victory:

> I supplicate and pray thee for victory, preservation of life, and liberty against men insolent, unjust, insatiable, impious, – if, indeed, we ought to term those people men who bathe in warm water, eat artificial dainties, drink unmixed wine, anoint themselves with myrrh, sleep on soft couches with boys for bedfellows, – boys past their prime at that, – and are slaves to a lyre-player and a poor one too.[72]

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[67] Tac. *Agr*. 16.1.

[68] Tac. *Ann*. 14.36. Interestingly, in another passage Tacitus mentions that women are also prominently present among the defenders of the isle of Mona during the Roman attack that took place shortly before Boudica's rebellion (Tac. *Ann*. 14.30).

[69] Tac. *Ann*. 14.37. According to Dio, Boudica fell ill and died, which seems to highlight a less favourable picture of the queen (Cass. Dio 62.12.6).

[70] Cass. Dio 62.5.4–6. Translation after Cary 1925.

[71] Cass. Dio 62.6.3.

[72] Cass. Dio 62.5.4. Translation after Cary 1925.

In contrast to the 'soft' Romans indulging in luxuries, the Celtic Iceni appear to be 'noble savages' who are fierce and terrifying, but uncorrupted by the benefits of civilisation.[73] As Gillespie rightly argues, Dio and Tacitus manipulated Boudica's story, as they had different agendas.[74] Boudica is a figure of resistance to Roman cultural norms, since her actions demonstrate an extreme example of the dangers of putting a woman in a position of power. However, the queen also possessed positive leadership qualities: she has the family, wealth, moral character, and intellect to garner the respect of her people, which is contrasted with the negative model of leadership displayed by Nero.[75] In fact, she represents Roman Republican values of motherhood and freedom, and displays *virtus* in a similar manner to Livy's Lucretia.[76] As Braund points out, Boudica is represented merely as a woman who proves to be more 'manly' than men themselves, similar to the freedwoman Epicharis who was tortured in connection to the Pisonian conspiracy of 65 CE:

> A freedwoman offered a rather fine example under extreme duress in protecting those with whom she had no connection and whom she hardly knew, when men who were noble and Roman knights and senators, untouched by torture, each betrayed their nearest and dearest.[77]

Tacitus also provides details regarding another Celtic queen, namely Cartimandua, who ruled the large tribal agglomeration known as the Brigantes in modern northern England and who was loyal to the Romans.[78] Cartimandua is explicitly referred to as *regina* by Tacitus, unlike Boudica who was more likely considered the wife of the king rather than a queen in her own right.[79] Interestingly, Tacitus mentions that the Romans had to send some cohorts to defend Cartimandua after she divorced Venutius, since the Brigantes were not willing to be subjected to a queen, which seems to contradict his afore-mentioned opinion that the Britons made no distinction between male and female rulers.[80] Cartimandua, in contrast to Boudica, is pictured by Tacitus in a rather ambivalent manner as a woman who, similar to Artemisia I, uses treachery to gain power. This is expressed in the passage regarding Caratacus who sought her protection but was instead chained by her and handed over to the Romans.[81] According to Tacitus, the queen accumulated wealth and indulged

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[73] The recurring theme of 'noble savages' in ancient literature is also visible in the ancient descriptions of the Scythians (see Str. 7.3.9; see Porucznik 2021, 118–119 with further literature). Such a tendency for idealising distant peoples is explained by Romm as 'inverted ethnocentrism', according to which the centre of the *oikoumene* is seen as the most advanced place to live, however, it is corrupted by civilisation. Therefore, distant peoples are perceived as just and ethical due to their remoteness from the degenerated centre and the assumed simplicity of life (Romm 1992, 45–49; for examples from other remote regions of the *oikoumene*, see Keyser 2011, 47).

[74] Gillespie 2015; *ead.* 2018.

[75] Gillespie 2015, 418–427; *ead.* 2018, x.

[76] Gillespie 2015, 414. See also Adler 2008, 181; and for motherhood generally the contributions in Petersen & Salzman-Mitchell (eds.) 2012.

[77] Tac. *Ann*. 15.57. Translation after Braund 1996, 132.

[78] Tac. *Ann*. 12.36. On Brigantes, see Hanson & Campbell 1986.

[79] See Braund 1996, 124–125.

[80] Tac. *Ann*. 12.40; see Bulst 1961, 498–499. This clearly illustrates how ancient historiographers tend to refer to 'ethnic customs' as explanatory factors for foreign groups' actions and/or historical events involving them. However, the authors are rarely consistent and fully logical in expressing their views (see also note 97 below).

[81] Tac. *Ann*. 12.36.

in luxury; she rejected her husband, then took his relatives hostage and started a sexual relationship with a common soldier.[82] This alludes both to her sexual adultery and self-indulgence, traits that were unthinkable to a decent Roman woman.[83]

As Braund argues, Romans were fascinated by queens: female monarchs broke the accepted rules of gender roles within Greco-Roman society and they were believed to have control over the men of their kingdoms, which was perceived as intriguing and exotic.[84] A good example that illustrates the anxiety that was created by foreign queens is a poem by Propertius, in which he explores the problem of the enslaving power of ruling women known from myth and history, including Cleopatra, Medea, the Amazon queen Penthesilea, the Lydian queen Omphale, and Semiramis.[85] Tacitus' Cartimandua seems to be a reflection of queens such as Cleopatra and Semiramis, whose sexual impropriety demonstrates the social inversion of gender roles that is often attributed to foreign queens. In that sense, Tacitus' narrative concerning the Celtic female ruler has a moralising undertone and it does not offer any deeper analysis of Cartimandua's position or her political actions.[86]

The image of Celtic women in ancient thought seems to have been strongly influenced by the afore-mentioned conceptions of female 'manliness', bravery, powerful sexuality, and physical strength. Ammianus Marcellinus in his *Res Gestae* mentions that Celtic women are 'as large as men, with flashing eyes and bared teeth':

> Almost all the Gauls are of tall stature, fair and ruddy, terrible for the fierceness of their eyes, fond of quarrelling, and of overbearing insolence. In fact, a whole band of foreigners will be unable to cope with one of them in a fight, if he calls in his wife, stronger than he by far and with flashing eyes; least of all when she swells her neck and gnashes her teeth, and poising her huge white arms, proceeds to rain punches mingled with kicks, like shots discharged by the twisted cords of a catapult.[87]

Even though scholars argue that at the time, Celtic women could indeed seem tall when compared to an average Roman man,[88] such descriptions are mostly drawn from the common imaginary regarding various barbarian peoples living in the North.[89] Strabo, in his description of Celtic customs, mentions that 'in Bastetania the women dance promiscuously with the men, each holding the other's hand'.[90] In this passage he alludes to inverted gender roles, later arguing that the position of men and women among the Celts is opposite to how it is in his society: 'the labours of the two sexes are distributed in

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[82] Tac. *Hist*. 3.45.

[83] See Gillespie 2018, 38–41 who argues that in Tacitus' view, Cartimandua, unlike Boudica, fails as a moral model and a noble leader.

[84] Braund 1996, 118–124.

[85] Prop. 3.11. Braund 1996, 119–122; on the Oriental queens as the absolute 'other', see also Pyy 2024.

[86] Braund 1996, 126–132.

[87] Amm. Marc. 15.12.1. Translation after Rolfe 1935. A similar opinion can be found in Diodorus who mentions that Celtic women are not only as large in posture as men but they are also equally brave (Diod. Sic. 5.32.2).

[88] See Birkhan 2009, 598–599 who argues that Roman men had an average height of 1,5 m whereas some Celtic women could be 1,55 m tall.

[89] See Birkhan 1997, 23–24.

[90] Str. 3.3.7. On the communal or promiscuous sex habits of northerners, see p. 23 in the 'Introduction' to this volume.

a manner the reverse of what they are with us, but this is a common thing with numerous other barbarians'.[91] Additionally, the sexual attractiveness of Celtic women is alluded to in Suetonius' *Life of Caesar*. The Roman historian mentions that during Caesar's triumph his legionnaires sang a mocking song, according to which Caesar spent a substantial amount of money on seducing Gallic women.[92]

## 5. Germanic women

Ancient descriptions of Germanic women include numerous recurrent themes that are typical of barbarian peoples, including female leadership and their resemblance to men in terms of physical strength and courage. Among various Germanic groups that are described in Tacitus' *Germania*, the author mentions the tribes of the Sitones who are ruled by a woman, which he finds humiliating and regards them inferior not only to free people but also to slaves.[93] At the same time, the Germans are said to believe that there is 'an element of holiness and a gift of prophecy' in women, which makes their advice valuable. As examples, Tacitus refers to Veleda and Aurinia, who were respected to such a degree that they started to be venerated as deities. Veleda is also known from Tacitus' *Histories*, in which she is described as a politically influential seeress of the Bructeri, who correctly predicted the success of the Germans in their rebellion against the Roman legions.[94]

According to Tacitus, Germanic women resemble men in the way in which they dress, the only difference being that they wrap themselves in linen that they embroider with purple, and they leave their arms and a part of their breasts exposed. Cloaks are said to be the only garment used by the Germans who remain naked underneath and spend most of their time by the fire. In his next section, Tacitus adds that the wife does not bring a dower to the husband but the husband to the wife, which is opposite to both Greek and Roman customs. In these passages one can find not only the repetitive motif of inverted gender categorisation but also a subtle sexual undertone reflected in barbarian female nudity.[95] The physical appearance of Germanic women also resembles that of Celtic females. According to Tacitus, young girls are as tall as the men who they marry, and they are equal in strength and age. Their children also inherit the robustness of their parents. Furthermore, every mother chooses to breastfeed her child and (unlike in Rome) she does not entrust it to servants and nurses.[96] Such an imaginary view of Germanic tribes as 'noble savages' is certainly thought to be a criticism of contemporary Roman society by Tacitus. It has been proven on several occasions that his account of Germania is a literary rather than

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[91] Str. 4.4.3. Translation after Hamilton & Falconer 1903. For modern recurrent notions based on ancient authors, including the idea of matriarchy among the Celts, see Chapman 1992, 170–172.

[92] Suet. *Iul*. 51.

[93] Tac. *Germ*. 45. Cf. the aforementioned Aristotelian passage on barbarians who do not recognise the natural categories of females and slaves which makes them inferior to the Greeks and prone to be ruled by them (Arist. *Pol*. 1252b 2–3).

[94] Tac. *Germ.* 8, *Hist.* 4.61.

[95] Tac. *Germ.* 17–18. In Greco-Roman culture, female nudity was far from being unproblematic: among Roman upper-class society it was rarely acceptable outside the baths, whereas in Greek art a nude female often pertained to a slave, a courtesan, or a goddess (see Skinner 2014, 247, 222–226, 362; Foxhall 2013, 79, 132–133).

[96] Tac. *Germ.* 20.

an ethnographic work that was intended to reprimand Roman readers for their decadent life by depicting their northern neighbours as physically and morally superior and closer to nature.[97] Therefore, the passage from Tacitus regarding breastfeeding by Germanic women deserves closer attention, since it reflects contemporary concerns regarding this practice among Greco-Roman societies. An ambivalent attitude to breastfeeding among Greek and Roman women is widely attested in written sources, including contracts for the services of wet-nurses, advice on hiring a good wet-nurse and numerous inscriptions attesting the occupation of a wet-nurse.[98] The fact that breastfeeding was frequently left to professional wet-nurses is demonstrated in a third-century CE letter from a parent offering to pay for such a service for her/his daughter:

> I hear that you have forced her to breast-feed. If you wish, let the baby have a wet-nurse. I do not want my daughter to breastfeed [...].[99]

Nevertheless, written sources from the second century CE reveal that the doctrine of the advantage of breastfeeding by the biological mother was advocated by philosophers and physicians.[100] The physician Soranus advises that 'it is better to feed the child with maternal milk, for this is more suited to it, and the mothers become more sympathetic towards the offspring'.[101] However, if it is not possible, Soranus says that the employed wet-nurse should be young, healthy, self-controlled, and tidy. Additionally, 'she should be a Greek so that the infant nursed by her may become accustomed to the best speech'.[102] This pejorative connotation with a foreign wet-nurse is also well expressed in a discourse from Aulus Gellius' *Attic Nights*, in which the philosopher Favorinus tries to persuade an upper-class woman to breastfeed her child:

> He [Favorinus] proceed to ask how long the labour had lasted and how difficult it had been, and was told that the girl, exhausted by the labour and long time without sleep, was taking a nap. At last he began to speak at some length. 'I have no doubt', he said, 'that she will nurse the baby with her own milk'. But when the girl's mother said that her daughter should be spared this and nurses provided – so as not to add the burdensome and difficult task of nursing to the pains of childbirth, he said, 'I pray you, woman, let her be completely the mother of her own child. What kind of half-baked, unnatural kind of mother bears a child and then send

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97 Wells 2011, 215 and note 5 with further literature; Bringmann 1989; Woodman 1993. See also Gruen 2011, 158–178 who interestingly points out many contradictions in Tacitus' depictions of Germanic peoples. E.g. the abstemiousness in their diet (which appears as an intentional comparison to Roman lavishness and self-indulgence) contradicts the information on their indulgence in feasting which is mentioned by Tacitus just a couple of paragraphs earlier in his text (Gruen 2011, 164). On the influence of Tacitus' Germans on the later tradition, see e.g. Maner 2018, 33–37, 80–85; Geroulanos 2024, 29–43.

98 E.g. *CIL* 6.25728 (an epitaph set up by a devoted wet-nurse for the deceased child whom she nursed; Rome, imperial period); *CEG* 571 = *IG* II² 7873 (an epitaph for a wet-nurse; Athens, after 350 BCE); *BGU* 4.1106 and 1107 (two contracts for the services of wet-nurses for slave children; Alexandria, 13 BCE); *POxy*. I 91 (a receipt of wages for nursing (Oxyrhynchos, 187 CE). For advice on hiring a wet-nurse, see Sor. *Gyn.* 2.18–20 and a Pythagorean text, Thesleff 1965, 123–124. See Lefkowitz & Fant 2016, 237–239, 343–349. For records of women employed as wet-nurses, see Lefkowitz & Fant 2016, 292–293.

99 *PLond*. 951 verso. Translation after Lefkowitz & Fant 2016, 238.

100 See Lefkowitz & Fant 2016, 263 note 83 with further literature.

101 Sor. *Gyn*. 2.18. Translation after O. Temkin, see Lefkowitz & Fant 2016, 343.

102 Sor. *Gyn*. 2.19.

> it away? […] Or do you think', he said, 'that women have nipples for decoration and not for feeding their babies? […] Why in heaven's name corrupt that nobility of body and mind of the newborn human being, which was off to a fine start, with the alien and degenerated food of the milk of a stranger? Especially if the person you use to supply milk is, as often the case, from a foreign and barbarian nation, or if she is dishonest, or ugly, or immodest, or unchaste, or a drinker […]. The disposition of the nurse and the quality of the milk play a great role in character development; the milk is, from the beginning, tingled with the father's seed, and affects the baby from the mother's mind and body as well.'[103]

This passage clearly demonstrates that it was believed that the child acquires physical and mental characteristics from the woman through her milk. As one may assume, ethnic stereotypes attached to foreign women must have often played an important role in employing a suitable wet-nurse. Favorinus obviously represents the conservative Roman view of women and their biologically determined roles primarily as mothers, a view that was consecutively challenged by Roman women during the Imperial period, merely by the practice of contraception, abortion and infanticide.[104] The epitaph of Graxia, found in Rome on a marble sarcophagus dating to the second/third centuries CE, proves that women who did not try to avoid the burden of breastfeeding were praised for their virtue; they certainly fulfilled the Roman ideal of a loving and caring wife who is fully devoted to her family:

> [The sarcophagus] of Graxia Alexandria, distinguished for her virtue and fidelity. She nursed her children with her own breasts. Her husband Pudens, the emperor's freedman [dedicated this monument] as a reward to her. She lived 24 years, 3 months, 16 days.[105]

In light of these sources it appears clear that Tacitus' brief mention of Germanic women breastfeeding their offspring was made deliberately in order to criticise the idea of hiring a wet-nurse, which was a common practice among Roman upper-class women. The image of a devoted barbarian woman nursing her child certainly corresponded well to the idea of a 'noble savage' who is not corrupt by civilisation and who does not neglect her duties as a mother.

## 6. Climate and human nature: 'noble savages' and/or 'savage barbarians'

Tacitus' Germans share many characteristics of peoples living at the edges of the known world: both their savagery and the nobility of uncivilised peoples are a result of their remoteness from the centre of the *oikoumene*.[106] They wear cloaks and the skins of wild

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[103] Gell. *NA* 12.1. Translation after Lefkowitz & Fant 2016, 238–239.

[104] Pomeroy 1995, 166–168. Tacitus seems to allude to this problem in his *Germania* by saying that it is shameful for the Germans to limit the number of children or to kill a child born after the father's death, which shows that good habits are more effective there than good laws elsewhere (i.e. in Rome where the Augustan legislation on marriage that was intended to increase the birth rate had seen little success; see Pomeroy 1995, 161, 166).

[105] *CIL* 6.19128.L. Translation after Lefkowitz & Fant 2016, 237–238.

[106] See Keyser 2011, 46–47. For the concept of the edges of the world in ancient thought, see especially Romm 1992.

animals, and do not buy clothes from merchants. They live a simple life in wooden houses and dug-outs and do not have cities and spend a lot of time by the fire. They are just, brave in battle, warlike, very hospitable, not corrupted by the luxuries of civilisation and they often use barter rather than coins in transactions. Their marriage code is very strict, but at the same time, there is no class-distinction in upbringing between the children of rich and poor: all play naked and dirty on the ground along with the cattle.[107] All Germans are thought to have 'fierce blue eyes',[108] red hair and a strong posture. It is also said that due to the severity of the climate, they are used to cold and hunger, however, they cannot endure thirst and heat.[109] Such a description of the Germans (and consequently, Germanic women) is certainly influenced by the idea that local conditions and the environment shape human character, which was closely intertwined with the ancient theory of climatic zones. This theory deserves closer attention, since it helps understand the background for the formation of ancient concepts regarding foreign societies. Notably, extreme weather (hot or cold) was believed to affect not only a person's appearance such as skin colour and hair type, but it was also supposed to determine human behaviour by producing particular ferocity among certain groups of people.[110]

The theory of climatic zones was most probably first introduced by the second-century BCE astronomer and geographer Hipparchus of Nicaea, whose technical work seems also to have incorporated an ethnically framed angle, at least occasionally.[111] There were five *klimata* (κλίματα) that were perceived as stripes of land 400 stades wide, situated on each side of a parallel of latitude (Fig. 5.1). Inhabitants situated in the same latitude were believed to share the same *klima* (κλίμα).[112] The connection between location, climate and habitation had already been noticed by Herodotus who argues that the North cannot be inhabited due to the extreme cold and snow.[113] Strabo mentions that there are three possibilities in terms of temperature on earth, which is reflected in the division into climatic zones:

> With respect to the temperature of the atmosphere […] there are three main divisions, which influence in a remarkable degree both plants, animals, and every other animated thing, […] namely, excess of heat, want of heat, and a moderate supply of heat. In the division into [five] zones, each of these is correctly distinguished. The two frigid zones indicate the want of heat

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[107] Tac. *Germ.* 17 on clothing, 16–17 on habitations, 11–12 on justice, 6 on bravery, 14 on warlikeness, 21 on hospitability, 19 on lack of luxuries, 5 on lack of coinage, 18–19 on strict marriage-customs, 20 on upbringing of the children. For a similar image of the Celts that was built upon from the time of Posidonius by authors such as Strabo, Diodorus and Julius Caesar, see Keyser 2011, 50–51 with further literature.

[108] Cf. the aforementioned passages on Gauls and their fierce and flashing eyes (Amm. Marc. 15.12.1; Cass. Dio 62.2.3).

[109] Tac. *Germ.* 4.

[110] Dueck 2012, 84–87. For a comprehensive overview of Greek and Roman written sources regarding environmental determinism, see Irby 2016. For proto-racism in antiquity, see Isaac 2004; also Harrison 2025.

[111] Hipp. Nic. T 6 (*GAGW* 16) *ap.* Plin. *HN* 2.53; F 37 *ap.* Str. 2.1.18 on the British being Celts; cf. how F 35 *ap.* Str. 1.4.4 situated Britain and Borysthenes (Olbia) on the same latitude.

[112] Dicks 1955, 248. According to Strabo, Polybius argued for six zones, however Strabo himself, Eratosthenes and Posidonius promoted the idea of five (Dueck 2012, 86; Str. 2.3.1). The division of the world into seven *klimata* that appears in the works of late Roman writers was originally used for astrological rather than geographical purposes (Dicks 1955, 251; for Ptolemy's system of seven 'astrological' *klimata*, see Shcheglov 2004).

[113] Hdt. 4.7; 4.31. Dueck 2012, 84–85.

> being alike in the temperature of their atmosphere; the temperate zones possess a moderate heat, and the remaining, or torrid zone, is remarkable for its excess of heat.[114]

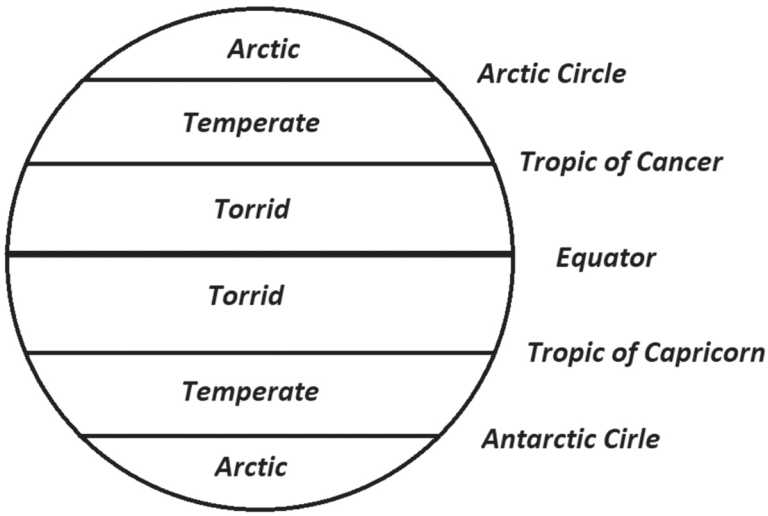


Fig. 5.1: Five climatic zones (adopted from Dueck 2012, 85, fig. 2).

The frigid (arctic) zones were perceived as natural boundaries of the *oikoumene* to the north and south, whereas the temperate zones, that were enclosed by the torrid and frigid zones, were considered the best places to inhabit due to their perfect ratio of heat and cold:

> To the east and west, it is true, the boundaries are formed by the sea, but to the north and south they are indicated by the atmosphere; which in the middle is of a grateful temperature both to animals and plants, but on either side is rendered intemperate either through excess or defect of heat.[115]

The fact that the climatic zones were associated with certain groups of people is visible in Strabo's comment that Posidonius gave ethnic indicators to the frigid and torrid zones, and that he referred to them as the Ethiopian and the Scytho-Celtic zones.[116] The belief that local weather conditions impacted upon peoples' health was already present in the Hippocratic treatise *On Airs, Waters, Places*, the author of which points out that a physician who arrives at a new town should examine its position with regard to the winds and the rising of the sun.[117] A further connection between weather conditions and the forms of plants and animals was explored by ancient writers.[118] Consequently, this gave impulse to the belief that geographic location and local climate conditions determine not

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[114] Str. 2.3.1. Translation after Hamilton & Falconer 1903.
[115] Str. 2.3.1. Translation after Hamilton & Falconer 1903. The same idea is expressed in Arist. *Mete*. 362b.
[116] Pos. F 49 B 4a (E-K) *ap*. Str. 2.3.1.
[117] [Hippoc.] *Aer.* 1.1; Irby 2016, 251–253.
[118] Arist. *Hist. an*. 605b–607a (8.28); Pos. F 49 B 3a-b (E-K) *ap*. Str. 2.2.3; Irby 2016, 253–255.

only human appearance, behaviour and health, but also the social, economic and political situation of certain groups of people, which easily led to ethnic stereotypes based on climate and geography such as ferocity, simplicity and poverty of non-Greek (and later non-Roman) peoples.[119] Aristotle explicitly claims that, similar to the peoples of Asia, the inhabitants of the cold regions of Europe are not able to maintain a well-organised political system due to their insufficient qualities, unlike the Greeks who are naturally capable of ruling their neighbours:

> The nations inhabiting the cold places and those of Europe are full of spirit but somewhat deficient in intelligence and skill, so that they continue comparatively free, but lacking in political organisation and capacity to rule their neighbours. The peoples of Asia, on the other hand, are intelligent and skilful in temperament, but lack spirit, so that they are in continuous subjection and slavery. But the Greek people participates in both characters, just as it occupies the middle position geographically, for it is both spirited and intelligent. Hence it continues to be free and to have very good political institutions, and to be capable of ruling all mankind if it were to attain constitutional unity.[120]

The same concept was later adopted by the Romans who started to perceive themselves as the perfect and natural rulers of the world, which is expressed by Vitruvius in his *De architectura*:

> In Italy the inhabitants are exactly tempered in either direction, both in the structure of the body and by their strength of mind in the matter of endurance and courage […] Italy presents good qualities which are tempered by admixture from either side both north and south, and are consequently unsurpassed. And so, by its policy, it curbs the courage of the northern barbarians; by its strength, the imaginative south. Thus the divine mind has allotted to the Roman state an excellent, temperate region in order to rule the world.[121]

Following this theory, the image of northern women that was built by ancient authors seems to correspond well with the idea of climatic determinism. The women who inhabited the northern regions of Europe were believed to be naturally shaped by their environment that made them strong and courageous, traits that on the one hand were perceived as typically masculine in the Greco-Roman culture but on the other hand, they could easily be associated with physical and mental stamina, fertility and sexual attractiveness.[122]

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[119] Dueck 2012, 87.

[120] Arist. *Pol.* 7.6, 1327b 24–36. Translation after Dueck 2012, 87. See also the descriptions of the northern 'astrological' *klimata* by Ptolemy: Ptol. *Tetr*. 2.2 (where the peoples of the north, called the Scythians, are described as white in complexion, straight-haired, tall, cold by nature and savage in their habits due to the cold climate) and 2.3 (where the peoples of Britain, Gaul and Germania are said to be fierce, wild and bestial in contrast to the Italians who have a milder character and are better leaders; see Keyser 2011, 51). On Ptolemy's ethnography, see Marcotte 2017; *id.* 2021.

[121] Vitr. *De arch.* 6.1.11. Translation after Dueck 2012, 90. For a similar opinion on the superiority of the Romans and their political organisation, see Str. 2.5.26.

[122] On a symbolic level, female rulership was projected into the very earliest European history – indeed the origin of the continent's very name – by Hegesippus of Mekyberna, who in the late fourth century BCE wrote about queen Europē, describing her as a Thracian ruler instead of a Phoenician woman: Hegesipp. *BNJ* 391 F 3 *ap. Schol. in Rhes.* 29; see Sordi & al. 1999, 16.

## 7. Conclusions

As has been demonstrated, the ancient image of northern women was shaped by several layers of literary tradition regarding barbarian peoples. Consequently, various, often contradictory characteristics were attributed to them by Greek and Roman authors: they are described as tall and strong, courageous but also fierce and vengeful, warlike but also good mothers, clever and noble but also cunning and treacherous, masculine but also sexually attractive and fertile. Ethnic stereotypes tended to wander across different cultural zones and it comes as no surprise that in Greek and Roman thought, northern women shared many characteristics of Eastern female rulers, such as Artemisia I. The idea of barbarian men being effeminate and prone to be dominated by strong women is a recurrent theme that was frequently used by ancient writers to highlight the otherness of foreign peoples. This seems to have had two aims: either to demonstrate the moral values of the barbarians that can be found in the severity of their customs (such as in Tacitus' works), or to explain why they are not capable of keeping their freedom, and why they should be ruled by the Greeks or the Romans (such as in Aristotle's and Vitruvius' works).

The Greeks and the Romans looked at foreign customs through their own gender categories, which certainly gave impulse to look for the mythical Amazons among the nomadic population of the Eurasian steppe. Inverted gender roles were applied not only to Amazons, but also to Celtic and Germanic women by indicating their female 'masculinity' and the similarity of male and female gender roles in those societies. The cold climate of Northern Europe was also perceived as a strong factor in determining the nature of northern peoples and therefore, Scythian, Celtic and Germanic women were believed to be shaped by similar environmental conditions that determined not only their physical strength and endurance but also the severity of their character.

Nevertheless, certain differences between the Greek and Roman conceptions of northern women can be discerned, which help establish a chronological pattern in the development of their image. The Greek vision of northern women was deeply rooted in a broader framework of Otherness, originally shaped by encounters with the East. Greek authors conceptualized women above all in terms of biological inferiority and domestic seclusion; when barbarian women appeared as rulers or warriors, they were typically masculinized in literary portrayals. This reflected a Greek cultural logic in which courage, political authority, and military power were coded as inherently masculine. As a result, figures such as Amazons or Sauromatian women were interpreted as inverted gender categories, symbolizing the disorder of barbarian societies. In Greek thought, then, northern women functioned as an extension of a philosophical and ethnographic discourse that classified 'barbarian' peoples as irrational, slavish, and lacking natural hierarchies – an outlook epitomized in Aristotle's reflections on women and barbarians alike.

Roman perceptions, while inheriting much of this Greek framework, were refracted through a distinct moral and social lens. Roman conceptions of womanhood emphasized the moral function of women within the household and the wider community. Although Roman women remained subordinate to men, they could be legally and socially visible as exemplars of virtue (such as Lucretia), patrons, or property owners.[123] Consequently,

[123] For the legal capacity and property ownership of Roman women (despite their subordination), see Gardner 1986; for their social visibility in civic life, including priesthoods, benefaction and the granting of public honours, see Hemelrijk 2015; for women as city patronesses and benefactresses in Roman communities, see

Roman authors often used accounts of powerful northern women to moralize about gender roles and society. Figures such as Boudica or Cartimandua could be depicted either as exemplars of noble resistance and maternal virtue (Tacitus' Boudica), or as dangerous, treacherous, and overly sexual queens (Cartimandua, likened to Cleopatra or Semiramis). In Tacitus especially, northern women often served as a mirror to critique Roman decadence, their 'natural' courage and simplicity contrasted with Rome's moral decline.

Thus, the Greek view was more ontological, grounded in philosophical notions of women's natural inferiority and the 'inverted' customs of barbarians. The Roman view, by contrast, was more pragmatic and moralizing: northern women became narrative tools through which Roman authors reflected on their own values, anxieties, and political realities. Where Greek thought explained barbarian female power as an aberration against nature, Roman writers sometimes reconfigured it as a sign of uncorrupted strength or as a moral counterpoint to Roman weakness.

Notably, the importance and the high value attributed to women among northern barbarian societies became another wandering motif that reoccurs at the western edges of the *oikoumene*. Hellenistic sources claim that men on certain islands near Iberia praised women to such a degree that the ransom they demanded for female captives was three or four times higher than male captives.[124] These recurrent themes were sometimes long-lasting and thus they have shaped modern perceptions of ancient societies, which undoubtedly resulted in the search for the legendary warrior women both in the Eurasian steppe and the Amazon rainforest as well as the existence of matriarchy among the ancient and modern Celts.[125]

The ideological and philosophical agendas of ancient writers, which emphasized the otherness of northern women – whether through depictions of their ferocity and wildness or of their moral superiority – do not preclude the possibility that northern European societies followed social patterns different from those known and accepted by the Greeks and Romans. A recent ancient DNA study revealing reduced mitochondrial diversity among Iron Age Celtic populations in Britain suggests matrilocal tendencies, with many women remaining in their natal households while men moved, possibly reflecting matrilineal descent.[126] Such a system would have strengthened women's roles in kinship and property rights. This evidence challenges the long-standing assumption that patrilocality, widespread in the Greco-Roman world, was the dominant model in early European societies and may in part explain the curiosity and amazement with which ancient authors described northern women.

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also Hemelrijk 2004. Note that greater freedom in property management for women is occasionally attested in Greek society outside Athens, for example on Amorgos (see the series of *horoi* dating to the fourth and third centuries BCE: *IG* XII 7, 57A; *IG* XII Suppl. 331; *IG* XII 7, 58 and *IG* XII 7, 412). For public honours bestowed upon Greek women by civic bodies – despite the prevailing ideal of female silence in the public sphere, especially in Athens – dating from the Late Classical to the Roman periods, see Siekierka & al. 2021.

[124] See Diod. Sic. 5.17.3. Keyser 2011, 49.

[125] For the myth of Celtic matriarchy as a strong symbol of womanhood in the construction of modern Galician regional identity, see Kelley 1994.

[126] Cassidy & al. 2025.

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