CHAPTER ONE

INTERPRETATIONS OF THE AMAZON MYTH
IN THE NINETEENTH AND TWENTIETH CENTURIES

Linguistic archaeology: etymology as the key to the mythical core

[...] In order to be able to give a true account, across the whole of mythology, as to why a mythical creature should be reckoned man or woman, we must first set upon a more secure foundation what the sexes meant to the prehistoric times.... There is much to be said on this point, especially if we seek by intellectual enquiry to come to terms with the feelings which made the first languages treat so many words as either masculine or feminine; the reasons for which are by no means clear to us.


In the course of the eighteenth century, changes took place in philosophical and scientific discussions which led to new approaches and even encouraged the development of new disciplines. By the end of the century an intellectual climate had arisen in which the corpus of existing knowledge was being profoundly revised and other perspectives led to new insights. Knowledge about the Amazons was no exception: the framework which had determined the idea of this remarkable female nation ever since the Middle Ages was now regarded as unsatisfactory.

The first steps towards a new conception of the Amazon motif can be seen in the results of a new branch of inquiry, comparative philology. If a new leaf was to be turned over, it was only natural to begin with an analysis of the sparse firm evidence on the Amazons. In dealing with the relation between the etymology of the name or word [Amazones] and the interpretation of the Amazons as a mythical female people, we should not forget that the etymological project which was set in motion at the end of the eighteenth century was not a *creatio ex nihilo*. The scholars of ancient Greece had already initiated interpretation of
the Amazons by means of philological analysis. Both the ancient and the modern analyses of the word [Amazones] corresponded to a generally accepted practice of etymological explanation. The fact that this approach had already been attempted by commentators in antiquity was yet another reason for modern researchers to suppose that they were on firm ground. A selection from ancient Greek and modern etymological research may therefore help the reader to appreciate this approach to myth in general and to the core of the Amazon myth in particular.

According to literary tradition, Hellanikos of Lesbos (ca. 480–ca. 400 B.C.) was the first to attempt to explain the name [Amazones].

He was a contemporary of Herodotos, and betrays a similar intense interest in Greek and non-Greek stories and their background. A Byzantine scholiast cites him as follows:

[…] they are called Amazons because they cut off their right breast to prevent it from getting in the way when they use their bows. This is untrue, because that would have been fatal to them. Hellanikos and Diodoros (II, 45, 3) say that they cauterized this spot with an iron object before it [the breast] began to grow, to prevent it from growing.

(FGrHist 4 F 107)

The specific etymology in this citation may be connected with the representation of the Amazons as archers, a motif which can be found in the visual arts from the sixth century B.C. Apparently Hellanikos was referring to the etymology [a-mazos] or [a-mastos], which is later attested explicitly, resulting in [a-mazon], “breastless”. Perhaps he was even the auctor intellectualis of this etymology. The idea that the Amazons mutilated one or both breasts was a widespread assumption among Greek writers.

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1 All of the etymologies relate to the form [Amazones] or [Amazon], [Amazonides], the matronymic of [Amazones], is found sporadically in the extant texts. For the position and frequency of these words, see below, pp. 157, 159.

2 According to Apollodoros, the Amazons amputated the right breast so as not to interfere with spear-throwing, but they retained the left breast for feeding (Bibl. II, v, 9). According to Dionysios Skythobrachion, cited by Diodoros (III, 53, 3), the Libyan Amazons lacked both breasts because they were cauterized as young girls to prevent their breasts from growing. Q. Curtius relates of the Amazons whom Alexandros met that they went into battle with the left side of their bodies bare and that they kept their left breast for feeding, while the right breast was cauterized (VI, 5, 27–29). This idea becomes