CHAPTER FIVE

HERAKLES AND THE SIXTH-CENTURY DEVELOPMENT OF THE AMAZON MOTIF

*The archaic material: methodological considerations*

The ninth labour he enjoined on Herakles was to bring the girdle of Hippolyte. She was queen of the Amazons, who dwelt about the river Thermodon, a people great in war. For they cultivated the manly virtues, and if ever they gave birth to children through intercourse with the other sex, they reared the females; and they pinched off the right breasts, that they might not be trammelled by them in throwing the javelin, but they kept the left breasts, that they might suckle. Now Hippolyte had the girdle of Ares in token of her superiority to all the rest. Herakles was sent to fetch this girdle because Admete, daughter of Eurystheus, desired to get it. So taking with him a band of volunteer comrades in a single ship he set sail. (...)

Having put in at the harbour of Themiskyra, he received a visit from Hippolyte who inquired why he was come and promised to give him the girdle. But Hera in the likeness of an Amazon went up and down the multitude saying that the strangers who had arrived were carrying off the queen. So the Amazons in arms charged on horseback down on the ship. But when Herakles saw them in arms, he suspected treachery, and killing Hippolyte stripped her of her girdle. And after fighting the rest he sailed away and touched at Troy.


This passage from Apollodoros' mythographic work offers a good impression of how Herakles' confrontation with the Amazons developed to become an extensive story in the course of time. This is undoubtedly the most popular version of Herakles' Amazon episode, but it has to be set aside completely if one attempts to reconstruct the archaic motif. There is only one element in the Apollodoros passage which is also present in the earliest representations of Herakles: the fight with the Amazons. All the other motifs have been gradually added to this scene of combat:
the introduction of the confrontation in a series of labours of Herakles; the fixing of this series as the Twelve Labours; the theft of the girdle; the location of Themiskyra on the Thermodon; the Amazonology; Hera’s intervention.

The theft of the girdle is of particular importance among these changes. The first, extremely vague reference is the use of the name “Oiolykê” by the poet Ibykos in the sixth century. This name evoked associations with Amazons, but it is impossible to establish an unambiguous connection with Herakles and the girdle.¹ Ibykos’ poetic career was situated in Western and Eastern Greece, so that any claims to familiarity with the motif in Attika, the source of most of the Heraklean material (in the form of vase paintings) are very implausible. The title of a play by the fifth-century comic poet from Western Greece Epicharmos was “Herakles after the girdle”.² A fragment of Pindaros indicates that he too referred to Herakles’ theft of the girdle: Peleus went with Herakles to Troy, helped him to get the Amazon’s [zoostêr], and finally accompanied Iason on his way to bring Medeia from Kolchis.³ On the basis of this material we may assume that it was not until the fifth century that this motif acquired any currency. The earliest reference to the girdle in extant Athenian literature is in the work of Euripides.⁴ In fact, the motif of the girdle eventually came to replace Herakles’ Amazonomachy to some extent. In the version of Apollodoros, the fight comes about by accident, while Apollonios of Rhodos describes how Herakles captured Melanippe, the daughter of the

³ Pind. fr. 172. Pind. Nem. III, 63–69 describes Herakles’ journey to the Amazons with Iolaos and Telamon, but it does not mention the girdle.
⁴ Eur. HF. 408–417; the [zoostêr] of the [korê Areia] (= both daughter of Ares and martial young woman) which fastens her peplos. Eur. Herakl. 217: the [zoostêra poluktonon] (= the girdle which spreads death and corruption), which the speaker, Iolaos, has obtained together with Theseus—and add Herakles.