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The Transformation of the Art of War and the Military Functions of Greek Divinities

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THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE ART OF WAR AND THE MILITARY FUNCTIONS OF GREEK DIVINITIES

The divine functions in Greek religion have come to be regarded as static, invariable elements. The origins of particular local and Panhellenic cults have generally been sought in the most ancient times, demonstrating the continuity of their notional forms. It is well known that the Greeks ascribed to individual divinities the ability to manifest power in a specific domain, within a specific territory and in a specific manner. However, if we examine the structure of the world of the Hellenic gods, it turns out to be intentionally imperfect, as is particularly visible in the domain of war. It is found that, according to Greek notions, an enterprise of military nature is engaged in sometimes by all the gods (pantes theoi) or by local divinities whose temples happen to be located in the vicinity of the battlefield. The most interesting fact seems to be that the divinities or mythological figures might reflect the real changes taking place in Greek military custom. Artemis and the Amazons are two examples which clearly illustrate such a dependency. The transformations in the field of warfare that took place at the end of the archaic period altered existing notions concerning those figures.

It is hard to deny that Artemis is extremely strongly linked to the Persian wars. Indeed, surviving literary evidence indicates that in a military context that was the first occasion on which the goddess fired arrows. The Hellenes claimed that Artemis helped them to defeat the Persians, engaging in almost all of the great battles. This was certainly not merely the assistance of a local divinity. The Greeks attributed their victory at Marathon to Artemis Agrotera. The grateful Athenians venerated the goddess at Agrai on 6th Boedromion every year at least until the second century AD, the celebrations having a

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markedly military setting. The Athenians themselves regarded Artemis Agrotera (the Huntress) as primarily a Spartan divinity, since it was to her the Spartans offered a goat as sphagia immediately prior to battle, although it is hard to establish how old this custom was. It is said that from the plunder at Marathon there was raised a temple to (Artemis) Eukleia. The Athenians offered to Artemis Proseoa a military votive offering together with the dedication of thanks placed on a temple column in connection with the battles at the Artemision. At Salamis the Greeks were assisted by Artemis Mounichia. Themistocles raised a temple to Artemis Aristoboule. Between the battles of Salamis and Plataea, Artemis Soteira defended the land of the Megarians against the Persians. A surviving epigram ascribed to Simonides, dedicated to the warriors of Megara, mentions a temple to Artemis wielding a bow (Ἀρτέμιδος τοξοφόρου τέμενος). In a mythological military context Artemis appears several times in the literature of the 5th century BC. From a later period quite numerous items of information have survived concerning the military epiphanies of the goddess and the epigrams and inscriptions of a military nature which were dedicated to her.

Some researchers claim that the military cult of Artemis is older than the Persian wars, while others claim that the link between the goddess and war is superficial. All of them perceive in Artemis an eternal ruler of the uninhabited, and therefore dangerous, border territories, and on that basis link the divinity with military crisis – fighting getting out of control. It does not seem,
however, that the evidence of Artemis’ military activity prior to the period of the Persian wars is significant enough to consider it inexplicable by the potential engagement of all divinities in military conflict. This is confirmed by literary evidence, which tells us more than archaeological sources. It is true that Homer mentions Artemis as taking part in battles\(^1\), just as it can be accepted that the formulae of Homer and Hesiod relating to all of the gods do not exclude this goddess from fighting\(^2\). However the scene from the *Iliad* in which Hera deprives Artemis of her bow and arrows, pointing her to a place way behind that of Hera herself in the military hierarchy, does not provide evidence of the goddess’s military potential\(^3\). Artemis did not come to help Skamandrios in battle, although she taught him the art of hunting\(^4\). The epithet *Agrotera* (ἀγροτέρα), which appears only once in Homer’s poetry, may be an interpolation\(^5\). In Homer’s *Hymn to Artemis*, composed at the end of the 7th or beginning of the 6th century BC, the goddess is described as *scattering arrows* (ιόγατα), but not in a military context\(^6\). Alcaeus is not aware of the military function of the goddess\(^7\). Anacreon speaks only of Artemis observing the valiant inhabitants of Magnesia*. This original conviction that Artemis is not among the divinities strongly intervening in the world of warfare can also be found in Lucian, who in a simplified manner describes the division of functions between Athena (the art of war) and Artemis (hunting), with the remark that Artemis conceded precedence to Athena in military matters\(^8\). How, then, is it possible to explain this complex picture of the divine functions?

It seems justified to link the notions of the goddess’s military nature with the changes taking place in the field of warfare at the time of the Persian wars. Surviving evidence indicates that the introduction of a separate formation of lightly armed warriors took place in the Greek world in the period of the Persian wars\(^9\). Until that time, warriors armed with bows, slings and stones formed an integral part of the army, fighting in a compact mass alongside soldiers equipped with shields, spears and swords. Not only did the archaic Hoplite model of battle not exclude the use of long-range projectiles, but they even played a significant role in battle\(^10\). Iconographic presentations from that

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1 Homer, *Iliad* XX, 39.
3 Homer, *Iliad* XXI, 479–496.
4 Homer, *Iliad* V, 49–53.
6 Homeric *Hymn* 27, 2, 11.
period show figures of Greek warriors with combinations of elements of armour: helmet, shield, breastplate and bow. According to surviving accounts, a contingent of foot archers (from Athens) first appeared at Plataea in 479 BC, although Aeschylus describes archers on the ships taking part in the battle of Salamis a year earlier – at Psyttaleia near Salamis the Greeks fired at the enemy with a hail of arrows from taut bows (τοξικής τ' ἀπο θώμιγγος ὀπο προσπίτνοντες ἄλλυσαν). Herodotus reports that there were no riders or archers at Marathon. It is nonetheless known from various sources that the Athenians progressed to mobilizing slaves, as is demonstrated by their graves, surviving until the times of Pausanias. It can therefore be assumed that all types of arms were in use, and that the lightly armed formations played a greater role than is implied by the sources, which idealize battle.

After the period of the Persian wars lightly armed formations were in widespread use in the Greek states, although they did not obtain significance in military ideology, quite the reverse – bows, stones and slings were regarded as weapons inappropriate to a Hellenic warrior, through typical of foreign armies and the poor (a bow and arrows cost half the price of a shield and spear). The information, recorded in the works of Strabo and Polybius, that the Greeks did not use long-range projectiles probably originate with the 4th-century historian Ephorus, fearing the dangers coming from the use of the new weaponry of catapults. A prohibition on the use of long-range projectiles is supposed to have been placed on a column of the temple of Artemis (Amarnthia).

The ambiguous attitude to the unarmed (aoploi), as the Greeks called warriors who were not Hoplites, means that Artemis was seen rather as a divinity of war, not particularly the patron of archery divisions or lightly armed formations. The links between the goddess and armies of archers are revealed in mythology in association with the Amazons, who appear in the classical literature in the role of female archers. Iconographic depictions dated to approximately 500 BC show Artemis in the company of Amazons. This is chronologically consistent with the first literary mention, by Pindar, who is supposed to have written that the Amazons raised a temple to Artemis of Ephesus during an expedition against Athens. Other iconographic evidence from the late 6th and early 5th centuries BC indicates that from the symbolic

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1. P. Krentz, Fighting by the Rules, p. 29.
5. Pausanias, The Description of Greece 1, 32, 3–5, 7, 15, 7 & 10, 20, 2.
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standpoint it was war that encroached on the territory of hunting, not the other way round. Around 520 BC the Hoplite arms (shield, helmet, greaves, sword) appear in depictions of deer and wild boar hunts, even though they could not have performed any practical function\(^1\).

Vernant, describing the manner in which Artemis acts, indicates that the goddess disoriented the fighters, surprised them, sowed panic, blinded them or placed them in darkness\(^2\). This is not inconsistent with the functions of lightly armed formations, which were used to break the enemy’s ranks, destroy the enemy’s fields and hold the enemy army back at mountain passes. Forces with light weaponry constituted a significant threat during civil wars and riots\(^3\).

At the end of the archaic period there were also changes in notions concerning the Amazons. Iconographic evidence shows that, at first, the Amazons were generally ascribed Greek weapons. When an Amazon was depicted fighting a Hoplite, sometimes it is only her white skin that enables a researcher to distinguish the woman from the heavily armed Greek warrior\(^4\). The Amazons appear in the same thematic context as Hellenic fighters. They prepare for or engage in battle: carrying shields and helmets, wearing greaves, carrying off fallen comrades, mounting horses or riding chariots\(^5\). Regardless of the uncertain origin and multidimensional meaning of the myth of the Amazons\(^6\), we should most certainly reject the simple dependence of the birth of the myth on the Persian wars — the impulse for the barbarization of the clothing of the female warriors and the creation of the tale of their expedition to Greece world could not have come from the fighting between the Greeks and the Persians. As early as c. 530 BC, and maybe somewhat earlier, Greek painters began to depict the Amazons with elements of oriental weaponry: the Scythian bow, Thracian shield, pointed headwear, trousers, and later the battleaxe\(^7\). The Amazon invasion was probably described in the Theseid, dated in principle to the end of the 6\(^{th}\) century BC\(^8\). Consequently there must exist another reason why the Amazons gradually lost their Greek character. It is

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notable that the process of barbarization of depictions of the Amazons corresponds chronologically to changes in military custom in the Greek world.

As van Wees has shown, between 530 and 500 BC the Hellenes broke with the tradition of carrying arms in public places, just as the custom of exhibiting weapons on the walls of the household lost its importance\(^1\). Undoubtedly the elimination of arms from public life was a gradual process, and they disappeared slowly during the 6\(^{th}\) century BC. At the beginning of that century men still carried spears with them, these replacing the sword that had been exhibited since Homer’s times\(^2\). In the Western colonies, between the 7\(^{th}\) and 5\(^{th}\) centuries BC, laws were introduced to prohibit appearing with weaponry at assemblies, in the bouleuterion and at the agora. It remains an open question whether such prohibitions existed within the Greek poleis\(^3\). One way or the other, appearing with weapon in hand at the agora in the 5\(^{th}\) century BC was regarded as a battle alarm. The exhibiting of arms in peacetime (siderophoria) was considered a Barbarian custom. Clear proof of this is provided by the accounts of Thucydides and Aristotle\(^4\), who reported that the Greeks carried iron in ancient times, when they had not yet emerged from barbarism. Thucydides states that the custom was maintained in the outer regions of Hellas\(^5\).

The Amazons are undoubtedly closely connected with weaponry, and not only in iconography. There are few literary accounts where in the context of the Amazons there is no mention of arms. This can be summed up in a short formula – there is no Amazon without weapons. Moreover, the warrior women can also be associated with burial customs, which is not surprising, since the Greeks very often depicted their death. The oldest mentions of the Amazons relate to their graves in Troas\(^6\). Later many of them were said to be buried within Hellas\(^7\). This is probably connected not so much with the heroic tradition as with the custom of placing elements of weaponry in graves. In central Greece this was still done at the end of the 8\(^{th}\) century BC\(^8\). Hardwick is correct to see in the development of the myth of the Amazons a symmetrical relationship linking that development with the changing model of Hellenic culture\(^9\). If the Amazons originally represented the virtues of the Homeric warrior, and later functioned in connection with the culture of the oikos, then

\(^1\) H. van Wees, Greeks Bearing Arms,
\(^4\) Thucydides, The History of the Peloponnesian War 1, 5-6, Aristotle, Constitution of Athens 1268 b.
\(^5\) Thucydides, The History of the Peloponnesian War 1, 6.
\(^6\) Homer, Iliad II, 814, The Aethiopis 1–3 = Proclus, Chrestomathia 2.
\(^7\) Plutarch, Theseus 27, Pausanias, The Description of Greece 1, 2, 1 & 1, 41, 7.
\(^8\) H. van Wees, Greeks Bearing Arms, pp. 338-343, J. Whitley, The Archaeology of Ancient Greece, pp. 187-188.
\(^9\) L. Hardwick, Ancient Amazons – Heroes, Outsiders or Women, passim.
the myth could all the more reflect the transformations in military custom. When it came to be believed that it was Barbarians who permanently carried arms, the Amazons were transposed to the world of the barbaroi. After transformation the Amazons existed outside the Greek World and their customs resembled those of the Greeks depicted by Thucydides in the Archaeologia. They remained in a state of permanent war – in the combat readiness with weapon at hand.

In summary it can be concluded that notions of the military functions of the divinities could undergo modification almost under the influence of current events, even though by assumption they remained static, because they assumed the continuity of the traditions of the ancestors. In this way Artemis became a divinity strongly associated with war at the time when lightly armed warriors achieved independent status, while the Amazons underwent barbarization at the time when the Greeks ceased to appear with arms in public places.

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