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In Search of the Libyan Amazons:

Preliminary Research in Tunisia

by

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Introduction

When most people think of “Amazons,” they envision mythological warrior women who marched on Athens and were immortalized in Greek literature and art. Few people are aware, however, that ancient texts also speak of much earlier Amazons in “Libya” -- the term Greek writers used to variously refer to all of North Africa (sometimes with the exception Egypt) or to the entire continent of Africa itself. Most literature on the Amazons describes the later, better-known warriors, who are said to have dwelt in Asia Minor around the Black Sea near the ancient “Thermadon” River.¹ This paper focuses instead on the “Libyan” Amazons of North Africa. In this preliminary study, I draw on ancient texts, archaeology, ethnography, linguistics, and my own explorations in Tunisia in March 2005 to make the case that the Libyan Amazons were most probably real warrior women who existed in history.

Libyan Amazons in Diodorus Siculus and Tassili Rock Art

Female warriorhood in Africa is hardly the stuff of fantasy but has a long documented history in that continent, from Hatshepsut’s rule as pharaoh in Egypt in the late 15th century B.C.E. to the military leadership of Yaa Asantewa, who fought the British in Ghana in the early 20th century of the Common Era.² The earliest and most comprehensive account of the Libyan Amazons is found in the work of the Greek historian Diodorus Siculus (b. 80 B.C.E.). Diodorus acknowledges that most people of his day were likely to be skeptical about the existence of such Amazons (3.52.2), but affirms that many poets and historians of both early and later periods

¹ Their homeland was variously posited as western Asia Minor (present-day Turkey) or northeast Asia Minor along the Black Sea (Bennett 1967, 12) -- the latter being the legendary location of the ancient Thermadon River.

² See, e.g., Alpern (1998), Clarke (1988), Hannoum (2001), Radford (1967), Redd (1988), Williams and Finch (1988), and Wimby (1988) for studies on African female warriors and political leaders.

wrote of them. He specifically says he takes his own account from that of Dionysius of Mitylene.³

Diodorus's chronicle (*Library* 3.52-55), describes a nation of North African Amazons in which women held political and military leadership and served exclusively as the society's warriors, evincing great prowess with the bow, arrow, and horse. These Amazons were nomadic pastoralists and lived on an island named Hespera, located in the marsh Tritonis. Diodorus details the conquests in North Africa and West Asia made by the queen of one group of these Amazons, Myrina, and he mentions another Amazon tribe, the Gorgons, whose queen was Medusa.

According to Diodorus, the Amazons of Libya ultimately were vanquished in a series of defeats in Thrace and North Africa such that they disappeared entirely "many generations before the Trojan War" (3.52.2), when the later Thermadon Amazons were at their peak. Dating the Trojan War to approximately 1250 BCE, that would put the disappearance of the Libyan Amazons in the Bronze Age, perhaps the 14th century BCE. We can assume from this that the

³ It is conjectured that Dionysius of Mitylene (a locale that, interestingly, bears the name of a Libyan Amazon), surnamed Scytobrachion, lived either shortly before the time of Cicero (c. 106-43 BCE) (and was instructed at Alexandria), or as far back as the 5th century BCE. Attributed to him were works recounting the military expedition of Dionysus and Athena, and a prose work on the Argonauts in six books. He may also have been the author of the historic cycle poems, lost epics recounting ancient history up to the 12th century BCE. (Smith 1873, "Dionysius" entry, sec. 34) One translator of Diodorus's history, C.H. Oldfather, dismisses Dionysius's account as a mere "mythical romance" (Diodorus Siculus 1935, 246, fn 2), but I choose to view Dionysius as, if not a historian proper, someone who faithfully recorded ancestral genealogy. It is to be acknowledged that Diodorus has also had his ancient and contemporary detractors, among them Pliny, who accuses him of interlacing lies with truth. His histories have been dismissed by some as "mythology" (Kelly 1991, 48, 259). However, I take his accounts for the most part seriously (acknowledging that they may include distortions here and there). Diodorus himself at times refers to Dionysius's tellings alternatively as "legend" and "mythology," but one detects in his work an implication he believes they were historical. I embrace his euhemeristic approach to religious legend.

Libyan Amazons were in their full vigor earlier in the Bronze Age, and that they hailed perhaps from even remoter times.

Ancient rock art located in Algeria attests to the presence of warrior women during precisely the period Diodorus describes. A massive Bronze Age painting from Sefar in the Tassili n'Ajjer, for example, reveals, upon close inspection, a striking combat scene in which the figures shooting at one another with bows and arrows have breasts, indicating that they are women (Lhote 1959, 148; Lajoux 1963, 164-168). Female archers also appear elsewhere in the Tassili paintings from this period. I identify the Africanoid⁴ archer from Tin Abotéka (Lajoux 1963, 171), for example, as female, given that she has a hint of a breast. Furthermore, I identify figure 57 of Lhote (1959), which carries a bow, as female, as she, too, has a faint suggestion of a breast and is characterized by *steatopygia* (fleshy thighs and buttocks), a typically female body characteristic.⁵

Amazonian Auses in Herodotus

Writing several centuries earlier than Diodorus in the 5th century B.C.E., the Greek historian Herodotus provides ethnographic descriptions in his *Histories* attesting to cultures of his day bearing Amazon-like characteristics.⁶ Particularly noteworthy in this regard are the Auses, whom

⁴ I use the term *Africanoid* to denote a physiognomy that includes dark brown skin, kinky hair, full lips, and a flat nose. I avoid the more common term, *negroid*, because of the attachment of "inferiority" to the phenotype that often goes with it. See Drake (1990, xi).

⁵ One that is also particularly common among Africanoid women.

⁶ Herodotus, like Diodorus Siculus, also has had his ancient and contemporary detractors, who depict him as a sensationalist, if not an out-and-out fabricator of so-called ethnographic and historical information. My approach is generally to accept his observations as containing good measure of truth, and to attempt to cross-reference his claims with other literary and archaeological sources. In some cases, he's all we've got, and I see no need to dispute him on every single point even though some of his descriptions sound exotic. Indeed, it is the very fact that his ethnographic descriptions, frequently based on oral sources, in many instances reveal

Herodotus places, like the Amazons of Diodorus, around the shores of a lake named Tritonis, which was fed by the River Triton. According to the historian, the Auses held an annual festival in honor of Athena (4.181) (whom he confirms more than once [2.62; 4.181] was the same as the Egyptian goddess Neith, as did Plato [*Timaeus* 21e] and others). In this ritual, young maids (*parthenoi* or virgins) divided into two groups and fought each other with “sticks and stones.” The death of any maiden resulting from this combat signaled that she was not a “virgin.” Before the fight, the Auses picked out the most beautiful girl, dressed her publicly in a full suit of Greek armor and a Corinthian helmet, put her in a chariot, and drove her around Lake Tritonis. The Auses held that this combat ritual had come down to them from time immemorial, indicating that both it and the tribe’s worship of Neith were quite archaic.

Herodotus mentions that all of the tribes of Libya lived “on meat and milk” (4.188), which recalls Diodorus’s descriptions of the Amazons’ pastoral lifestyle, and lends credence to the possibility that the Auses were part of the very same group. He then comments further on religious practices, noting that the nomads living around Lake Tritonis (again, including the Auses) made ritual sacrifice to: 1) the sun and the moon, 2) Athena/Neith, and, next in importance, 3) to Triton and Poseidon.

cultures and cultural characteristics in direct opposition to those of ancient Greece, which was highly patriarchal, that to my mind make them particularly valuable, especially when they pertain to women’s social roles. I question whether the discrediting of his work may in some cases reflect more about the cultural biases of anrocentrally oriented historians than it does about the reality of ancient North African life. Henri Lhote (1959, 187), who was an expert on the ins and outs of the Saharan terrain, believes that from a geographical and geological point of view, in any event, Herodotus “had at his disposal very accurate information,” information most likely obtained from the caravan men who traveled the region. Ironically, however, even Diodorus, whom I have similarly defended, accuses Herodotus of interlacing lies with truth, which admittedly complicates things. For a discussion of the validity of Herodotus’s work, see, for example, Verdin (1975) and Momigliano (1969).

Herodotus further states his belief that the robe and aegis of the Greek Athena were in fact copied directly by the Greeks from the dress of the Libyan women of this area. The “aegis” refers to a kind of protective garment worn over the dress. Herodotus says that while Athena’s aegis was rendered as being cloth with snakes for tassels, the Libyan women’s aegis was made of red-dyed goatskin fringed with thongs of hide. What he is describing has been identified as one of the earliest forms of human armor (Herodotus 1920, 4.189.1, fn 1). That the Libyan women of Lake Tritonis regularly wore a kind of combat-ready clothing would be in correspondence with the possibility that they were Amazons.

Herodotus goes on to mention that “Libyan women” (read: the Amazons he has just been describing) were particularly skilled at uttering ceremonial cries during religious ceremonies, a practice the Greeks learned from them. The term for this practice is the onomatopoeic Greek *ololugé*, meaning a cry of triumph or exultation. It has its analog in the Semitic *Hallelu*, which has survived in the Christian *Hallelujah* (Herodotus 1920, 4.189.1, fn 2). It is what is also known in North Africa today as *zagharit* (Bates 1970, 154), commonly referred to in English as “ululating,” and is essentially accomplished by rapidly trilling the tongue against the roof of the mouth while uttering a high-pitched, single-toned sound. Herodotus implies that such ritual vocalizing was done in honor of Neith/Athena, and one may not unreasonably assume it was used during the combat ritual among the Ause maidens. Thus, I suggest it may have been a form of ritualized war cry to invoke Athena/Neith during battle.⁷

Given all of these sacred associations among the Auses, Robert Graves (1960, 44, sec. 8.1) posits that the annual combat of the maidens of the tribe represented much more than what Herodotus’s rather superficial account relays. He suggests, and I agree, that these girls were in

⁷ Smith (1907, 431) conjectures that the Libyan *ololugé* was generally a cry of ritual lamentation for sacrificial victims.

fact virgin “priestesses” who annually vied for the position of “high priestess.” This indicates that both warriorhood and priestesshood were strongly associated among the Libyan Amazons.

What is particularly striking in this section of Herodotus is the convergence in Ause culture of matriarchal characteristics⁸ and armed combat involving women, as evidenced in the fight between the maidens, the dressing up of one of the maidens in armor, and the veneration of what we will shortly confirm was in part a war goddess. He locates the tribe near Lake Tritonis, precisely which Diodorus identifies as the Libyan Amazons’ homeland. This is as close to an ethnographic description of Amazons in the work of any ancient writer.

The Amazon Goddess Neith/Athena

An analysis of the attributes and genealogy of the Auses’ goddess Neith offers further information about the possible nature of Libyan Amazon society. In the Egyptian pantheon, Neith was possibly the oldest divinity, and there is evidence that she existed before recorded history (Lesko 1999, 57). She was regarded by the Egyptians as an eternal and infinite being who was the ruling power of heaven, earth, and the underworld, and every creature and thing in them (Budge [1904] 1969, 459). To her is ascribed the famous inscription at Sais: “I am everything that has been, and that is, and that shall be, and no one has ever lifted my veil” (Plutarch, *De Iside et Osiride* 4).

⁸ For example, Herodotus says the Ause women were “common property” (4.181) and that tribe members engaged casually in sexual relations and did not live together as married couples. Paternity was determined only when a child was fully grown, and was assigned by group decision among the men according to the man whom the child most closely resembled. If we penetrate through the androcentric veil in his passage, we read in it the description of a matriarchal society. Such societies are typically characterized by the sexual freedom of their female members, communal child-rearing practices, and greater importance attributed to the maternity than paternity of the child.

But Neith was probably not an Egyptian divinity originally: During the Old Kingdom the Egyptians describe her as being from “Libya” -- that is, the area stretching from the oases of western of Egypt to the Atlantic coast of Morocco. They depict her, in the words of Herman Kees, “as if she was [sic] the chieftainess of the neighboring people with whom the inhabitants of the Nile Valley were at all times at war” (Kees 1961, 28).⁹ This latter characterization brings to mind the possibility that Neith herself may have been a Libyan queen who subsequently became divinized in African fashion. Deceased female heads of clans have long been revered among the Tuareg, one of the Berber/Amazigh groups thought to be descendents of the indigenous peoples of North Africa. To this day, various Tuareg sub-groups consider themselves descendants of a single female eponymous ancestress, one of whom is Tin Hinan, venerated by the Tuareg at what is thought to be her grave in Algeria.¹⁰

Significant to this discussion is the fact that in Egyptian times, Neith was known as Mistress of the Bow and Ruler of Arrows, which probably also reflects her original iconography in Libya. The earliest symbol associated with her was two click beetles, head-to-head, over two crossed arrows, and the crossed arrow motif endured as a part of her symbolism (Lesko 1999, 46; Budge [1904] 1969, 30-31, 451). Certainly this would make her a goddess not only of the hunt, but also of warfare, and it may be in this capacity, in particular, that she served as patroness of the Amazons.

⁹ I acknowledge that numerous Egyptologists contend that her first appearance is purely Egyptian, but I believe this represents an unwillingness to consider the possibility more generally that the indigenous peoples of North Africa, that is, the ancestors of today’s Berbers/Imazighen, may have helped found Egypt. See Hagen (2000) for an intriguing exploration of the possible Amazigh/Berber roots of Egyptian civilization.

¹⁰ For information on Tin Hinan, see, e.g., Brett and Fentress (1996, 206-07), Gautier and Reygasse (1934). For controversy regarding the geographical location of her tomb and her historical dating, see Gast (1973).

Neith's martial aspect and many of her other North African associations were retained in her Greek manifestation as Athena. According to Greek genealogy, Athena gestated in the womb of her mother Metis, a Titanis/Goddess who presided over wisdom and knowledge. Zeus swallowed Metis while she was pregnant with the Athena (Hesiod *Theogony* 886-890), but he was subsequently plagued by a severe headache as he walked by the river Triton. It was here that Hephaestus took an ax and split open Zeus's skull (Pindar, *Olympian* 7.65), from which Athena sprang with a mighty shout, fully armed, and leaped toward the river Triton (Apollodorus 1.3.6).

Apollonius Rhodius, the 3rd century B.C.E. epic poet, offers another account of Athena that confirms her Libyan origins and provides further telling Amazon-related details. He reports that the pre-Hellenic peoples in Greece, the Pelasgians, indeed believed that Athena was born beside Lake Tritonis/River Triton in Libya (*Argonautica* 4.1310). He adds that they believed she was found and nurtured by three nymphs dressed in goatskins. The Pelasgians maintained that as a girl, Athena killed her playmate, Pallas, while engaged in combat (Apollodorus 3.12.3). Apollodorus adds the detail that Pallas was the daughter of the river god Triton, thus affirming that the episode took place at the Lake Tritonis/River Triton. As a token of her grief, Athena placed Pallas's name before her own and became Pallas Athena. According to this story, her worship came to Greece from North Africa by way of Crete.

That Athena was consistently said to be "born" by Lake/River Triton affirms her African provenance. The motif of the "goatskins" worn by the women who raised her confirms her association with the Auses, and her armor connects her with battle and the Amazons, in particular. Her emerging with a "mighty shout" also links her to the Amazons, in that this sound may have been a ululation, that is, the Libyan cry of battle and triumph mentioned earlier.

I propose that the combat between Athena/Neith and Pallas was the very ritual that Herodotus describes of Ause girls fighting in honor of Athena/Neith to determine who among them were true virgins — or perhaps, as Graves suggests, priestesses. Could such a "legend" thus be referencing an actual historical biography in which Athena/Neith and Pallas were real women of the very distant past? Did Athena/Neith win the title of "high priestess" by killing Pallas in the maidenhood ritual? And upon her death, was she immortalized as the sacred ancestor/goddess of the Amazons who was invoked for all sacred ritual and warfare?

Vestiges of the Libyan Amazons in Tunisia

Ethnographic, linguistic, archaeological, topographical, and semiotic investigations of North Africa reveal what may well be numerous allusions to and vestiges of ancient Amazonian society. One of the most striking survivals may reside in the names traditionally used by indigenous North African Berber peoples to identify themselves as a cultural group: *Tamazigh* (also *Tamazirt*), which refers to the language, and *Imazighen* (sing. *Amazigh*) which refers to the people themselves. One of the Berber groups, the Tuareg, call themselves *Imuzagh*, *Imuzag*, *Amashaq*, or *Amazagh* (Hagan 2000, 75). There is some evidence that all of these and related terms were used to designate the native Libyans in the Egyptian and Graeco-Roman periods. Egyptians referred to the Libyans as *Mashwesh*, of which *Imazighen* is most likely a cognate (Hagan 2000, 32). In the classical period, Herodotus (4.175-95) mentions tribal names *Macae*, *Maxyes*, and *Machlyes*, also likely cognates.¹¹ Later, under the Romans, the widespread tribal name *Mazices* and its variants, such as *Maces*, may have been cognates as well, and may have been terms used to refer to indigenous Africans in general (Brett and Fentress 1997, 5). I would

¹¹ Hagan (2000, 69) also refers to spellings such as *Maziques*, *Masax*, *Mazaces*, *Mazikes*, and *Mastites*.

argue, then, that the term used by the Greeks to describe the warrior woman, *Amazon*, does not mean “one without a breast,” contrary to Diodorus’s (3.53.3) claim,¹² but rather was a garbled attempt to transliterate *Amazigh/Imazighen* into the Greek language.¹³ This would be in keeping with Greeks’ general habit of making transliteration errors when encountering foreign names, a phenomenon other scholars have noted.¹⁴ That the term *Amazon* may well come from the ancient name denoting the entire scope of indigenous North African peoples suggests that, far from being a minority group, the Amazons may have dominated ancient North Africa, or that North African culture at one time had a strong female warrior element.

Some identify the legendary Lake Tritonis with the *chotts* or salt lakes (now much desiccated) of Tunisia, particularly the Chott Jerid (e.g., Camps 1961, 548); others identify it with the Bou Ghrara Gulf, an inland sea off the eastern coast of Tunisia (e.g., Agence Nationale du Patrimoine 1996, 16). In either case, contemporary Tunisia seems to be the general location associated with this ancient lake, and thus with the Libyan Amazons and their ancient goddess, Neith/Athena.

In my explorations of Tunisia in March 2005, I indeed found numerous signs that may be suggestive of an Amazon legacy there. Symbols on the old wooden doors of the Ouled el Hadeif, or Old Quarter, in the town of Tozeur, located near the Chott Jerid, for example, are particularly suggestive in this regard. The doors, which date to the 14th century, reveal a panoply of prophylactic designs in nails, including horseshoes for good luck, fish to ward off the evil eye,

¹² Diodorus said the term comes from *a-mazos* (without a breast), and that it derives from the fact that Amazons seared the breasts of young girls so that they would not develop and be a hindrance in warfare. However, Bennett (1967, 13), a philologist, states that this etymology is false.

¹³ Austrian archaeologist and Amazon scholar Gerhard Pöllauer notes this linguistic correspondence on his Web site, “The Amazons” (1997-2006), particularly at <http://www.myrine.at/Berber/berber.html>, as does Walker (1983, 24).

¹⁴ E.g., Smith (2003, 459-500).

female figures resembling goddesses found on ancient European art, and, most interesting to this discussion, arrows, crossed arrows, and tridents (FIG. 1). Although the architecture of the old quarter in general is Islamic, these symbols seem to bespeak of a pre-Islamic antiquity. I propose that the arrows and crossed arrows may be a remnant of the ancient veneration of Neith, and that the tridents are a vestige of the veneration of Poseidon and Triton. The crossed arrow motif can be found, as well, on a detail of one of the traditional women's dresses found in the Museum of Arts and Popular Traditions in Houmt Souk on the island of Jerba, located off the coast due east of Tozeur.

Also in Eastern Tunisia, silver brooches known as fibulae, commonly designed with a long spike sometimes ending in a triangle, have a striking an arrow-like appearance. These items, which indicate a woman’s status, are worn by Berber/Imazighen women on each side of the upper chest to hold the mantle in place (Courtney-Clark 1996, 130-31). Symbols of the matriarchal Tuareg people, which appear profusely on jewelry as well as decorative and utilitarian objects, include in many cases what may also be interpreted to be arrow tips, as well. Neolithic/Early Bronze Age arrowheads have indeed been collected in abundance particularly around the *chotts* of Tunisia (Smith 1982, 389, 394), confirming the longstanding presence of the bow and arrow in this region.

Another interesting symbol with Amazonian resonances found throughout Tunisia is what I term, after the Greeks, the *pelta*. The Greek *pelta* was a small shield, shaped like a half moon, which was used in combat and which appears in the hands of Amazons in works of ancient art. Occasionally it was peaked at the inner part of the crescent to resemble an ivy leaf (Xenophon *Anabasis* 5.4.11).

That the *pelta* symbol may have originated in ancient Libya, possibly among the Amazons, is suggested by *pelta*-shaped designs on traditional textiles and jewelry of the Berbers/Imazighen. Such a motif appears as an amuletic Tuareg symbol, for example¹⁵ (FIG. 2). In this latter case, the *pelta* is incised with further motifs, such as the triangle, which, according to Malika Grasshoff (a.k.a. Makilam 1999, 48-53), represents to the Berbers/Imazighen the female vulva and its the magical life powers. The Berber/Amazigh *pelta* also greatly resembles the image of the bird goddess found throughout matriarchal Neolithic Old Europe and Minoan Crete,¹⁶ again attesting to its possible connection with women, the sacred female, and matriarchal culture.

The peaked *pelta* also appears as a repeating motif on a necklace housed at the Museum of Arts and Popular Traditions on the Tunisian island of Jerba in the town of Houmt Souk. It is among a collection said to be made by the island's Jewish artisans, whose presence on the island may date back to 566 B.C.E.¹⁷ Could the immigrant Jews have picked up the *pelta* motif from the local Berbers/Imazighen? The *pelta* shape additionally appears embroidered on a traditional bridal shawl housed in the small Berber Museum in Tamzert in southeastern Tunisia.

This particular shawl also features lunar crescents, another common Berber/Amazigh symbol, which recall the symbol of Ta-Nit, the goddess associated with the ancient Phoenician city of Carthage in northern Tunisia (c. 5th century B.C.E.). Like Neith, Ta-Nit was worshipped as an armed deity (Meyerowitz 1958, 132) and her name in fact may be a cognate of the Libyan

¹⁵ I am indebted to Gerhard Pöllauer (pers. communication, March 2005) for initially making the connection between the peaked *pelta* and this Berber/Amazigh motif.

¹⁶ See, e.g., Gimbutas (1989, 8, 39, 95, 191, 295).

¹⁷ The date of the arrival of the first Jews to Jerba is disputed; some believe it was 566 B.C.E., following the fall of Jerusalem to Nebuchadnezzar, others say 71 C.E., when the city was taken by Titus. Today about 1500 Jews inhabit the island of Jerba. Historically, Jewish artisans worked there as jewelers (Morris and Jacobs 2001, 382).

Neith/Nit, suggesting that the two goddesses were one and the same (Bertholon and Chantre 1913, 612, 618) and that they both reflected the warrior aspect of women. A further connection between Ta-Nit and indigenous North African culture can be seen in the fact that the orant, or upraised arm posture, in which the Carthaginian goddess is usually depicted, continues today as a ritual dance gesture among the Berbers/Imazighen called the "Aza" (Hagan 2000, 23). Moreover, contemporary Berbers/Imazighen have adopted the orant sign as a symbol of resistance against political oppression (Hagan 2000, 54).

I found this gesture in closer proximity to in Tunisia, not far from Chott Jerid/Lake Tritonis. In the rock shelter of Chaabet el Marek, north of the town of Tataouine in the village of Ghomrassen, is an ancient rock painting of two orant figures in red ochre, one of whom has protrusions sprouting from the head¹⁸ (FIG. 3). The two figures are depicted with a person of unidentifiable sex who is either riding horseback or leading a bovine animal with a harness. Immediately next to the two orant figures is a snake. Given that the snake and the cow were of the epiphanies of the Amazon goddess Neith,¹⁹ and that the orant gesture was a sign of Ta-Nit (a form of Neith), the entire constellation suggests the presence of the sacred female, perhaps Neith herself. Could the scene represent a blessing of the person (woman?) riding the horse/leading the bovine? What is the meaning of the double orant figures? Could this relate to the fact that all over the world the female deity is frequently depicted as a complementary or opposing pair (e.g., Isis/Nephythys, Demeter/Persephone, Inanna/Erishkegal)?

¹⁸ These may be ostrich feathers, typically depicted as head adornment on ancient North African art. See, e.g., Lhote (1959, figs. 44, 47)

¹⁹ In Egypt, serpent imagery is associated with Neith, as can be seen in a spell from the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, imagery from Tutankhamen's tomb, and the Hymn to the Diadems (Lesko 1999, 56). Neith is depicted in bovine form, for example, in Coffin Text spell 15, in Herodotus's descriptions of her festival at Sais, and on the wall of the temple to the god Khnum at Esna (Lesko 1999, 55, 59, 60).

Neith/Athena was also regarded as the divine patron of weavers (Lesko 1999, 56). Wallis Budge ([1904] 1969, 451) speculates that her very name may be connected with the root *netet*, “to knit, to weave,” and that two symbols that often appear above her head may in fact be weaving shuttles. For the Berber/Imazighen women of Kabylia, weaving is still very much a magical art. We may see a vestige of the Auses’ ancient worship of Neith, sun, and moon in the Kabyle women’s contemporary view of weaving as an act that unites “sun” and “moon” (representing the masculine and the feminine) in the drawing together of the threads (Makilam 1999, 42). An observation on the Tunisian flag is interesting in this regard, as well: it contains the symbol of the lunar crescent encircling a star/sun; both motifs regularly appeared in the iconography of Ta-Nit, as well.

A fragment of a legend associated with a megalithic site on the Tunisian island of Jerba calls to mind the Greek version of Medusa, who was named by Diodorus Siculus as the queen of the Amazonian Gorgon tribe of ancient Libya. This site, just east of the town of Sedouikech, consists of a long avenue of two parallel rows of megalithic stones of unknown antiquity, most likely dating at least to the Bronze Age, if not earlier. A well whose outline bears a resemblance to a uterus and fallopian tubes, or to two vulva-shaped basins, lies nearby.²⁰ That this avenue of megaliths was most likely considered to be a sacred site is attested to by its continued ritualized use by the local Berbers/Imazighen, who leave burnt offerings, candles, and other signs of religious activity directly on the stones.

The local legend relates that the 16th century hermit Sidi Satouri, whose mausoleum lies some 500 yds to the southwest of the site, once turned to stone members of a wedding party who interrupted him at prayer (Jacobs and Morris 2001, 384). A local informant I spoke with added

²⁰ Pöllauer (2005, 8) first noted this correspondence in the shape of the well.

the detail that nearby residents consider the megalithic stones of the site to be the remains of the wedding party’s petrified guests. Women typically visit the hermit’s mausoleum to have wishes granted by the ancestral saint, particularly the wish to conceive children.

In this we see an entire constellation of motifs associated with women and female fertility: the uterine well, the pregnancy-granting tomb, and the “wedding” story. Moreover, stones were always associated with Amazon religion. Meteorites and other baetyls were venerated by Amazons in antiquity, including the Black Stone venerated as Cybele/Artemis in Pessinus in Phrygia, and a similar black stone venerated by Amazons on an island off ancient Colchis (Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica* 2.1172-77). Both of these latter stones were central pillars in Amazon ritual, and recall an event recounted by Diodorus (3.59.8) of the Libyan Amazon queen Myrina setting up altars to Cybele on Samothrace.

Another detail suggesting a possible Amazonian connection with the site is that of the hermit turning of the guests to stone. For, in Greek legend, it was Medusa who had the power to turn men to stone through her gaze (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 4.792-802). After beheading Medusa, the Greek military hero Persues turned an entire dinner party of King Polydectes of Seriphos to stone by displaying her head (Apollodorus 2.4.3). Even the late patriarchal Greek legend confirms Medusa’s Libyan provenance by naming her as one of the three Gorgon “sisters” who dwelt there (Hesiod, *Theogony* 270-280). Could the motif of Sidi Satouri freezing his guests for all time, then, somehow be related to the history of the Libyan Queen Medusa?

As an interesting coda to the theme of the megaliths of Jerba, in March 2005, when I visited the tomb of Sidi Satouri, I heard two Berber/Amazigh women ululate as punctuation to a ritual they conducted in the inner sanctum of the mausoleum. The high-pitched, aggressive sound immediately sent chills down my spine, as it struck me as highly incongruous element in a ritual

of petition to a dead hermit. I immediately had the impression that it was a battle cry, and thus it was particularly striking to me to later learn about the ululating of the Amazonian Ause women. That the custom of ritually ululating has been retained by Berber/Imazighen women in North Africa may serve as just one small piece of evidence to demonstrate that the Berbers/Imazighen descended in part or whole from the Amazons.²¹

Stories of the seventh century C.E. military leader Kahina²² are a well-documented part of North African history and suggest that female warriorhood may never quite have died in this part of the world. According to historical accounts, Kahina ruled the whole of Ifriqiya (contemporary Tunisia) and, with her army, temporarily repulsed the Arab invasion of the continent. She was also a spiritual leader who exhibited prophetic abilities (Hannoum 2001, 1-28). The warrior-priestess combination echoes the figure of the Libyan Amazon Queen Myrina, who set up rites in Samothrace and elsewhere.

Certainly North Africa has a long history of female rulers, holy women, and queens, quite a number of whom were warriors who participated directly in battle. Berber/Amazigh culture, in particular, contains many matriarchal elements, and historically the Tuareg included female tribal heads and heads of camps. In my ongoing work, I continue to investigate the cultures of the Berbers/Imazighen and other and North and Central Africa in my search for possible remnants of the Libyan Amazons.

²¹ Today, however, the cry is used to mark events such as births and deaths, the reception of startling or happy news, the entry of a notable person into a camp or village, etc. (Bates 1970, 154 fn 2).

²² Her name has been transliterated in various ways: Kahena, El Cahena, El-Kahena, El Kahéna, al-Kahina. In its North African pronunciation, there is sometimes no article: al-kahina or kahina (Hannoum 2001, xix). Her tribe may also have descended from Jews.

The Challenge of the Amazon Image for Matriarchal Studies

Africa has had long tradition of matriarchy, probably going back to prehistoric times,²³ and, as I have argued here, seemingly a long tradition of amazony. Not all African matriarchies have included female warriorhood, and not all African amazony has had its development under conditions of matriarchy. Thus, it would be an error to lump matriarchy and amazony together.

The issue is an important one, especially given the tendency in the collective imagination to equate matriarchy with female violence and female-on-male abuse and repression. We do see the Libyan Amazons portrayed this latter way by Diodorus Siculus, but this depiction does not represent how matriarchy functions in general. Heide Göettner-Abendroth in fact has discovered that matriarchies are usually societies of peace, and speculates that they may always have been so since the earliest human times.²⁴

Diodorus's account of bloodthirsty and imperialistic Libyan Amazon tribes as cultures that amount to "reverse patriarchies" indeed presents a problematic picture for the feminist scholar of conscience who abhors warfare of any kind and is not interested in promoting female warriorhood or lauding women's participation in it. The first point to be made in this regard is that one must remember that the history of the Libyan Amazons was written by males who were fully indoctrinated into the patriarchal mindset of ancient Greece. Richard Smith (2003, 497), who has written eloquently on the ancient Libyans, confirms that from the Greek historian Herodotus to the Arab historian Ibn Battuta, male commentators on North Africa consistently observed the high position of women there and uniformly discredited the feminine power that they witnessed. Thus it may be that Diodorus's negative descriptions of Libyan Amazons are

²³ Bates (1970, 112-113) confirms the strong probability that among North Africans matriarchy "was at some early period widely established."

²⁴ See Göettner-Abendroth (1987, *passim*) for a development of this idea.

somewhat overdone and distorted. The second point is that it is unknown whether amazony developed spontaneously or was rather a response on the part of peaceful matriarchal societies in Africa to Bronze-Age patriarchal incursions.

The ultimate purpose of this work is surely not to glorify warfare or women's role in it, but simply to demonstrate that women once had a type of agency so inconceivable today that it has been consigned to the realm of "fiction." May hope is that such agency may be reclaimed and transmuted into more effective social forms.

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