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# GRYPHOMACHIAS. AMAZONS AND GRYPES IN ANCIENT ART

**Abstract:** The Amazon mythical universe has become one of the most important exponents of the Greek religious tradition throughout history. Dozens of Greco-Roman authors have mentioned these warrior women for centuries, and we know of thousands of pieces of art dedicated to their legendary combat. The most demanded during Antiquity were the Amazonomachy and the scenes representing the ninth labor of Heracles, but this was not always the case. In the 4th century BC, recent studies show that those themes were relegated in favor of Gryphomachy, which reached levels never seen before in terms of their production. Also known as Gryphons, Gryps, Grypes, *Gryphoi* (from the singular form, γρύψ) in ancient Greek, they symbolized strength and bravery. There is still an important debate regarding the identification of the figures that faced such terrifying beasts in these works, but in this article we intend to demonstrate that the majority correspond to Amazons, not to Scythians, Persians or Arimaspians as have been traditionally recognized, and that not all of them represent combat, but friendly scenes perhaps intended for their training.

**Keywords:** *Amazons, Gryphons, art, vase painting, Arimaspians, Scythians.*

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## INTRODUCTION

There are several reasons why the Gryphomachy is particularly noteworthy among the images associated with Amazon myths in Greek art. In contrast to the narratives of Greek heroes such as Herakles, Achilles, Theseus or Bellerophon, which are extensively documented in classical sources, there is no mention of a connection between these female warriors and any fantastical creature. This is significant as both were perceived as exemplars of the “chaos” that was believed to prevail in those territories beyond the confines of the Greek world, which was regarded as the sole civilised and ordered domain. However, this association extends beyond the conceptual domain, manifesting in a more direct manner in artistic representations.

The considerable number of works purporting to depict Amazons and Gryphons, not only in Hellenistic vase painting but also in other materials, appears to suggest that this was not an arbitrary or indirect connection. Indeed, we may even speculate on the existence of classical written sources that made reference to this relationship, although these sources have not survived. The Greeks ascribed considerable significance to their artistic representations,<sup>1</sup> which, while adapting to meet demand at particular times and places (both within and beyond the Hellenistic world due to their exportation), remained consistently faithful to the established canons that enabled

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<sup>1</sup> TALBOT RICE 1957, 106; SCHILTZ 1994, 203–204. Just as Scythian elites commissioned these artistic pieces to treasure them as objects of prestige (SANCHEZ SANZ 2019b, 73).

the scene and its protagonists to be recognised without the need for explanatory typography.<sup>2</sup>

Some of these visual codes were used to represent characters or cultures that, in the context of Hellenistic thought, exhibited a certain degree of resemblance. In the case of the Amazons, an orientalisising visual aspect was assumed from the 5th century BC onwards, similar to that of other real or imaginary peoples situated in close geographical proximity to the Greeks. These included the Persians and Scythians among the former, and the Arimaspians, Amazons and Hyperboreans among the latter. Consequently, it has proven challenging to ascertain whether a specific protagonist in a Griphomachy represents a Scythian or an Arimaspians based solely on their physical appearance.<sup>3</sup> However, a key factor in the case of the Amazons has enabled the inclusion of a significant number of these works among those dedicated to their myths with a high degree of certainty. This is because only female figures appear alongside these creatures, making it implausible that they were Scythians, Arimaspians or Hyperboreans.

This paper will analyse the representations of Amazons and Gryphons in Hellenistic art. The earliest examples of these representations appear between 525–475 BC, but they reached their greatest expression in the 4th century BC. They were mainly associated with vase painting and were located not only in mainland Greece or the Scythian territory of northern Pontus, but also in other contexts such as the Iberian Peninsula. We will examine the possibility that local interest may have been a factor in the establishment of workshops dedicated to the production of these pieces in certain peripheral colonial contexts. In conclusion, the data obtained will be presented alongside possible interpretations based on the archaeological context and the sources.

## AMAZONS AND GRYPHONS IN ANCIENT ART

A total of 217 vase paintings and 17 reliefs have been catalogued, the latter of which depict interactions between Gryphons and female figures identified as Amazons. These figures are distinguished by their oriental dress, appearance, or characteristic weapons. The scenes depicted in these reliefs have been identified as Griphomachy, although they do not always depict combat. In some cases, the scenes may be partially or fully combined.<sup>4</sup> The works span the period from the Archaic period (525–500 BC) to the Roman period (1st century AD), with a particular concentration in the 4th century BC.<sup>5</sup> The majority of the works correspond to the red-figure technique (214), with only a single example in black figures.

<sup>2</sup> SANCHEZ SANZ 2014, 36.

<sup>3</sup> Contrary to DARENBERG and SAGLIO (1969, 19) or AMAD (1975, 20), who believe that every main character in a griphomachy must be an arimasp, as this is the only known reference in literature, although there may have been lost traditions.

<sup>4</sup> SANCHEZ SANZ 2019a, 687.

<sup>5</sup> BLANCO FREIJEIRO (1959, 106–107) identified several Greek pieces with these motifs, which ROSTOVITZ (1931, 185) and MINNS (2011, 113) attributed to the increase in production in Attica in response to the demand that occurred in the 4th century BC in the Scythian markets. CABRERA BONET and MORENO CONDE (2014, 51) explain that it was intended to provide an attractive symbolism for the Bosphorus Kingdom as a symbol of its new political entity.

The earliest known example is a terracotta relief from Duver (525–500 BC, Anatolia),<sup>6</sup> contemporary with the earliest examples in vase painting (2).<sup>7</sup> The scarcity of this example is notable, yet its significance lies in the evidence it provides that the traditions intended to narrate the relationship between the two types of mythical figures were known from ancient times. Nevertheless, no further ceramic examples can be found until 425–375 BC (4),<sup>8</sup> as is the case with reliefs. It seems reasonable to posit that they existed, although their scarcity prior to the 4th century BC indicates that they were not a frequent feature of the artistic scene, or at least did not attain the popularity of other themes, such as the Amazonomachies.<sup>9</sup>

However, in the 4th century BC, this type of scene reached an unprecedented peak in the iconographic context. The Griphomachias decorate almost two hundred very similar ceramic pieces (188), several reliefs (5),<sup>10</sup> as well as the only mosaic of which we have evidence (370 BC Eretria).<sup>11</sup> We only know of a few later reliefs up to the 1st century AD. Twenty-three of these works could not be dated, although it is very likely that most of them belong to the 4th century BC. Some have been located in Italy (1)<sup>12</sup> and Libya (1).<sup>13</sup> Very few of the rest have been catalogued (2).<sup>14</sup>

This kind of representation exhibits distinctive characteristics that, to a significant extent, facilitate its identification. From the 5th century BC onwards, certain symbolic canons were established in Hellenistic art for the recognition of certain scenes or characters. These canons were not only based on the cultural-geographical context of the scenes or characters in question but also on the theme they represented.<sup>15</sup> These included the Oriental sphere, where, despite the existence of numerous cultures settled in those territories, Hellenistic craftsmen specialising in vase-painting assigned them syncretic iconographic characteristics in order to show them in a very similar way, regardless of their real or fictitious character. Such elements included oriental costume, the use of arms and the Phrygian cap, together with characteristic items such as the bow, the labrys, the pelta and the sagaris.

These elements constituted part of the Amazon symbolic imagery throughout antiquity,<sup>16</sup> which has rendered the identification of this type of figure from others of similar appearance, such as those attributed to Medes, Persians, Scythians, etc., a challenging endeavour. In many cases, it

<sup>6</sup> Mus. of Art and Archaeology. Univ. of Missouri.

<sup>7</sup> A skyphos (525–500 BC. Beazley Archive Vase Number -from now onwards BAVN 330676) and a lekythos (600–480 BC. Saint-Germain-en-Laye, Mus. d'Archéologie Nationale MAN31286).

<sup>8</sup> A krater in Castellones de Ceal (BAVN 340101), a kylix in Italy (Oxford, Beazley, fr.), a lekythos (BAVN 2301487) and a pelike (BAVN 29151).

<sup>9</sup> SANCHEZ SANZ 2019a, 29.

<sup>10</sup> A rhyton in southern Italy (350 BC, Oxford 1947, 374), another from Taras (350–330 BC, Seattle Art Mus.), another found mainly in Italy (350–300 BC, Br. Mus. 1847,0806.42), a gold crown as part of the trousseau in a Scythian female tomb from Bliznitsa (4th c. BC, The State Hermitage Mus.) and a rhyton from the Panagyurishte treasure in Bulgaria (400–300 BC, Panagyurishte History Mus.).

<sup>11</sup> House of the Mosaics (370 BC).

<sup>12</sup> An Apulian volute krater (BAVN 9007572).

<sup>13</sup> A pelike from Apolonia (Italy. Private fr.).

<sup>14</sup> Corresponding to lekane (BAVN 4482) and pelikes (BAVN 5186).

<sup>15</sup> SANCHEZ SANZ 2017, 146.

<sup>16</sup> SANCHEZ SANZ 2023, 3.

has been possible to differentiate between these representations according to the context in which they were inserted. For example, Amazonomachies starring Heracles or Achilles, or the abduction of Theseus. However, this is a challenging task that requires a degree of speculation.

Moreover, the depiction of Amazons and Gryphons introduces an additional layer of complexity, largely due to the involvement of the mythical Arimaspians people.<sup>17</sup> The Beazley Archive (BA) records 222 vases decorated with Griphomachias, the protagonists of which have been identified as Arimaspians. This identification is based on the survival of the literary tradition that associated both mythical beings, given that the former's interest in seizing the gold supposedly guarded by the Gryphons, which was naturally occurring in the region where these creatures resided, led to the survival of this tradition. The Arimaspians, as a people associated with the Oriental sphere, were consistently depicted in a manner analogous to that of the Scythians, Medes, Persians, Amazons, and so forth. There are only a few instances in which their masculine character is unambiguously evident,<sup>18</sup> which has presented a challenge in identifying scenes dedicated to the combat between Orientals and Gryphons.

Indeed, the BA acknowledges this discrepancy, offering varying interpretations for scenes that are practically identical in form, composition, and symbolism. Consequently, numerous Griphomachias featuring such figures have been identified as Scythians, Arimaspians, or Amazons indistinctly when they are, in fact, merely busts adorned with the Phrygian cap (Figs. 2 and 3). In some instances, multiple hypotheses have been proposed (Fig. 1). This differentiation excludes the Medes, Persians, etc., solely on the basis of geographical context, given that the mythical territory in which these creatures were believed to inhabit bordered to the north with that assigned to the Arimaspians.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, their identification has consistently been a priority.

The sources provide a list of the peoples who are believed to have inhabited the northern region of Pontus, along its coastline. These include the Scythians,<sup>20</sup> followed by the Isedons towards the north, and then the Arimaspians themselves. Beyond this, there are the territories of the Gryphons, and, finally, the country of the Hyperboreans by the North Sea.<sup>21</sup> It is for this reason that they have also been identified as Scythians, although not as Isedons or Hyperboreans. It seems reasonable to posit that the pieces in which the presence of Amazons has been thought to be appreciated support the belief that their mythical kingdom was situated to

the north of Pontus,<sup>22</sup> in contrast to the majority of sources, which prefer to locate it to the south, next to the mouth of the Thermodon. It is, therefore, challenging to accept that the Amazons travelled to these distant lands, as the Arimaspians did, to seize the riches guarded by the Gryphons. However, it would be more plausible if we consider the stories that associate them with the Scythians, particularly given that they were all mythical characters.

These figures exhibit similarities, such as the presence of a mole adjacent to the corner of the lips (Figs. 2 and 3), yet their interpretation remains markedly disparate. In any case, the compositional space typically constitutes a single scene in vase-painting representations, except when the piece incorporates handles for its use, in which case, independent scenes are usually created on both sides. Nevertheless, they typically demonstrate some form of interpretative relationship,<sup>23</sup> as evidenced by the discovery of pieces featuring an Amazon bust on one side and an isolated Gryphon on the other, identified as Griphomachias.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, a Griphomachy may be depicted on one side and an Amazonomachy on the other.<sup>25</sup>

In fact, these three pieces have been attributed to the same craftsman, known as the Amazon Painter, due to his evident interest in this specific type of representation.<sup>26</sup> He is the author of numerous scenes that have, on occasion, been identified as Griphomachias featuring Arimaspians,<sup>27</sup> Amazons,<sup>28</sup> or a combination of both.<sup>29</sup> The possibility of these interpretations is not excluded, although the choice between them is ultimately subjective.<sup>30</sup> In his writings, Strabo asserts that during the period between the 1st century BC and the 1st century AD, the term "Scythians" was used to refer to a diverse range of peoples residing in regions north of Pontus. However, earlier historians have proposed that these groups could be differentiated based on their historical and cultural characteristics. For instance, some have identified the Hyperboreans, Arimaspians, and Sauromathians<sup>31</sup> as distinct entities.

In the course of our study, we have excluded those cases in which all the protagonists display unambiguous male characteristics (such as a bearded appearance or the absence of a pronounced torso), as opposed to those that appear to represent exclusively female figures. It is equally possible that these scenes should be interpreted in the opposite way,<sup>32</sup> as representing Scythian or Arimaspians women, rather than Amazons. However, there is no evidence of unequivocal and exclusive representations of women in the Scythian context. Furthermore, the classical texts make no mention of the

<sup>17</sup> MACDONALD 1987, 23–45. CABRERA BONET and MORENO CONDE (2014, 46) explain it as a contamination of both themes.

<sup>18</sup> D'ERCOLE 2009, 214. The Pompeian villa of the Mysteries (cubiculum 2), or the one located in the Regio VI, Insula 12, houses 1–8, contain mosaics dedicated to Griphomachias featuring Arimaspians, due to the masculine character of their features.

<sup>19</sup> AESCHYLUS *PR.* 803 ss. The real existence of the Arimaspians, from a people calling themselves Mari (man) or Tsheremis, belonging to the Ugric family (MANDELSTAM BALZER 1999, 30; SINOR 1988, 398), located in the Middle Volga near the Ural gold mines, has been argued to explain these mythical allusions (SMITH/ANTHON 2010, "Arimaspians").

<sup>20</sup> SANCHEZ SANZ 2021, 8.

<sup>21</sup> HERODOTUS, *HISTORIA* 4. 13.

<sup>22</sup> PSEUDO-PLUTARCH, *Fluv.* 15; DIODORUS SICULUS 2. 45–46; EURIPIDES *Ion* 1140–1150; STRABO 11. 5. 3; PLINY *NH.* 6. 35.

<sup>23</sup> SANCHEZ SANZ 2019a, 597.

<sup>24</sup> BAVN 230148, 9021741, 218221, 230479, 9008363, 230436.

<sup>25</sup> BAVN 230452, 230453, 230455.

<sup>26</sup> BOARDMAN *et alii* 1991, 198–203.

<sup>27</sup> BAVN 137, 12928, 230458, 230475, 230476, 230480, 9007970, 230452, 230453, 230455.

<sup>28</sup> BAVN 3776, 4472, 230456, 230457, 9035977, 9035978, 9035979, 9035987, 9035988, 9035992, 9035993, 9035994.

<sup>29</sup> BAVN 9047850, 9047851.

<sup>30</sup> BAVN 340128, 9035999, 9036001, 9036003.

<sup>31</sup> STRABO 11. 6.

<sup>32</sup> LEBEDYNSKY (2009, 17) states that many characters identified as Amazons would correspond to Arimaspians, wrongly catalogued, although they could also be Scythians.





**Fig. 1.** Athenian pelike (4th century BC. Yalta, Mus. of Local History: 2551).



**Fig. 2.** Athenian lekane (4th century BC), which the BA (12498) identifies as an Arimaspians and a Gryphon.

collaboration of women in the fight between Arimaspians (males) and Gryphons.

However, isolated pieces of vase painting do appear to show a Griphomachy featuring male figures (bearded) and female figures identified as Arimaspians.<sup>33</sup> In the case of the Amazons, we are aware of traditions that attest to the existence of a male component, although this is

<sup>33</sup> For ex. BAVN 230372 and 12111.

predominantly associated with some kind of impairment.<sup>34</sup> However, Pseudo-Chalithenes makes reference to the participation of men in the military actions of the Amazons.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, he adds to the traditions that speak of annual encounters with men who inhabited their

<sup>34</sup> MIMNERMUS TRAGICUS, *CURFRAG.* tlg-0255.18; HIPPOCRATES, *ON THE ARTICULATIONS* 53; STRABO 11. 5. 1–3 and EUSTATHIUS, *EPITOME* 2. 4 (believe that it was originally mixed), DIODORUS SICULUS 2. 44–46.

<sup>35</sup> PSEUDO-CALLISTHENES 3. 25–27.



**Fig. 3.** Athenian lekane (4th century BC), which the BA (26162) identifies as an Amazon and a Gryphon.

territory independently, as Strabo indicated with regard to the Gargareans.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, he never makes them allies but rather the opposite.<sup>37</sup>

The accounts of Aristeas of Proconesus are frequently referenced by classical authors as a source on the peoples who inhabited those territories, with a particular focus on the relationship between the Arimaspians and the Gryphons.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, tradition posits them as a male people,<sup>39</sup> in stark contrast to the Amazons, which would render it challenging to identify these scenes as portraying women of the Arimaspians. Furthermore, they were purported to possess a single eye and the strength of numerous men,<sup>40</sup> a distinctive portrayal that is not reflected in artistic representations. It is challenging to envisage that the Scythians would embark on a journey to reach the purported territory of the Gryphons when they would first have to traverse the domains of the Isedons and Arimaspians, both mythical peoples with a proclivity for armed conflict with their neighbours.<sup>41</sup>

Anyway, the geographical dispersion of ceramic pieces decorated with Gryphomachias featuring female characters probably representing Amazons is very high. In the

4th century BC alone, we know of at least 188 examples,<sup>42</sup> although 86 do not include information on their location. These include present-day Greece (38), Ukraine (18) and Russia (10), Turkey (8), Libya (8), Italy (7), Spain (5), Macedonia (3), Egypt (2), Romania (2), France (1) and Syria (1). During this period, most of the works were produced using the red-figure technique, with the most popular medium being the pelikes. The primary focus of interest in the rise of this subject is in Greece itself, with a particular emphasis on Athens. It is evident that there is a paucity of comparable Italian examples,<sup>43</sup> which suggests a diminished interest in these scenes. However, this observation pertains exclusively to vase-painting, as the majority of known reliefs from the Roman period originated in Italy (8).<sup>44</sup> These include four rhytons dated between 350–250 BC, three panels from the 1st century BC to 1st century AD, and a cinerary urn from the 2nd century AD.

The considerable number of pieces discovered in Ukraine and southern Russia may be connected to the long-standing trade agreements established by the Greeks with the Scythian people through their colonies in northern Pontus. Given the significance of the Gryphon in their artistic tradition and in works of a Greco-Scythian nature,<sup>45</sup> it is plausible that the Scythians would have shown particular interest in this theme. Similarly, the specific symbolic conventions that were particularly prevalent in vase painting during the 4th

<sup>36</sup> STRABO 2. 5, 24.

<sup>37</sup> MIMNERMUS TRAGICUS, *CURFRAG.tlg*-0255.18; DIODORUS SICULUS 2. 45, 3. 40; STRABO 11. 5. 1–3.

<sup>38</sup> The Ἀριμάσπεια (HERODOTUS, *HISTORIA* 4.14), although only brief fragments are preserved in PSEUDO-LONGINUS (*DE SUBLIMITATE* 10. 4) and TZETZES (*HOMERICA* 7. 676–679 and 686–692).

<sup>39</sup> PAUSANIAS 1. 24, 6.

<sup>40</sup> HERODOTUS, *HISTORIA* 3. 116; PAUSANIAS 1.24.6. AESCHYLUS *PR.* 780.

<sup>41</sup> HERODOTUS, *HISTORIA* 4. 13.

<sup>42</sup> SANCHEZ SANZ 2019a, 692.

<sup>43</sup> An Apulian volute krater (BAVN 9007572).

<sup>44</sup> SANCHEZ SANZ 2019a, 693.

<sup>45</sup> MEYER 2013, 129.



century BC exerted an influence on the predominance of an Amazon image that was closely associated with the eastern sphere. Indeed, this subject matter exhibits a paucity of precedent, consistently manifesting the conventional Phrygian attire and headgear.<sup>46</sup> The relationship between Amazons and Gryphons in the artistic field is also evident in the context of reliefs, although it is less significant than in vase painting (17). However, the chronological range of these works is much broader, extending from the end of the 6th century BC to the 1st century AD. This could be evidence of a small but ever-present interest in the collective imaginary.

The majority of the artefacts are terracotta or bronze reliefs and rhytons, in addition to a gold wreath of Scythian provenance. It can be observed that the religious context plays a more prominent role in the vase-painting than in other forms of art. This is evident in the use of supports such as rhytons, the crown itself (which was used in funerary practices) or the possible dedication of some stelae to the decoration of sanctuaries. It is noteworthy that several reliefs from the 4th century BC have been discovered in Scythian contexts, including those from Bliznitsa (Taman) and the Panagyurishte treasure, which represents the pinnacle of this theme in vase painting. As might be expected, the greatest concentration of reliefs is also found in the same century, mainly in Italy (5), which is the opposite of the interest shown in ceramics in this context. There are no known works of this type in Greece, despite it being the main producer of vase-painting.

Furthermore, the remaining pieces include ceramic reliefs of Campanian origin (5)<sup>47</sup>, stelae (2)<sup>48</sup>, and a bronze relief also originating from the Italic peninsula<sup>49</sup>, which possesses the greatest number of such works. It seems reasonable to posit that there was a particular demand for these scenes in Magna Graecia during the 4th–3rd century BC. The gold crown found in the necropolis of Bolshaya Bliznitsa dates to the 4th century BC and is related to the Greco-Scythian commercial context, which was fostered by colonies such as Olbia or Panticapea from the 6th century BC onwards<sup>50</sup>. An illustrative example is the multitude of vase-painting specimens unearthed in Ukraine and southern Russia during the 6th century BC. Indeed, a considerable proportion of these works have been attributed to a single artist or school, including Group G (29) and the Amazon Painter (40), which collectively account for 31.8% of the total known. This is a noteworthy proportion, particularly when one considers that both belong to the group of schools and craftsmen included in the so-called “Kerch style”<sup>51</sup>, as they were produced there in the 4th century BC. This could indicate that the increase in interest in this type of work is related to the demand associated with this region under Scythian control<sup>52</sup>.

<sup>46</sup> We only know of one case where several infants appear, some dressed in the oriental costume and others in the short chiton (BAVN 230456).

<sup>47</sup> Campana collection, Italy. BM Cat.Terracotta D613; Naples, Mus. Naz. 22343; Roma, Mus. Nazionale Romano. 4360 and 4380.

<sup>48</sup> Roman plate relief (27 BC–14 AD, Louvre Cat.Camp 166) and a stucco panel from a Roman villa (1st century AD, Art Institute of Chicago).

<sup>49</sup> Br. Mus. 1439.

<sup>50</sup> SANCHEZ SANZ 2020, 28.

<sup>51</sup> BOARDMAN *et. alii* 1991, 198–203.

<sup>52</sup> The Kerch style has been interpreted as having been intended for eastern export markets in the 4th century BC. LIMC, *Amazones* 647.

## INTERPRETATIONS

The high proliferation of this type of work in the 4th century BC appears to adhere to a series of standardised patterns, indicating an interest not only in a specific medium, the pelikes, but also in a limited compositional variety. As might be expected, the works are divided into two categories: full-length figures and busts, which are mainly dedicated to individual figures. The former category of works invariably depicts Griphomachias, exhibiting a comparable ratio of group to individual combat scenes. These are portrayed as engagements between mounted warriors, foot soldiers, and, to a somewhat lesser extent, a combination of both. The weapons depicted in these works adhere to the traditional canons associated with the Amazonian environment, with spears and peltas being particularly prominent, while swords and sagaris are less common. The utilisation of bows is scarce, to the extent that they are of similar value to the use of rocks. The remaining pieces invariably depict one or more female busts, frequently situated alongside the head of an equid, thereby attesting to their status as horsemen and the presence of a Gryphon. It is noteworthy that in these scenes, there is a clear predominance of those in which all the figures face in the same direction (50), which is a curious phenomenon if we consider that this is a representation of combat, where figures are typically depicted with a convergent gaze (17).<sup>53</sup>

The analysis of these representations appears to indicate a clear differentiation between the two types of compositions. The relationship between the Gryphons and the Amazons is not merely one of confrontation; this interpretation extends to the sphere of the reliefs. It is conceivable that both mythical beings were involved in a collaborative endeavour, despite the savage nature ascribed to the Gryphons. It is accurate to conclude that there is no evidence of the existence of these creatures in the numerous scenes of Amazonomachy depicted in ancient art, nor is there any reference to them in the sources. However, it is possible to infer a relationship between the two based on certain works that appear to show an Amazon riding a Gryphon<sup>54</sup> or using it as a saddles to confront unidentified monstrous beings.<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, they are depicted in this manner in group scenes alongside other female characters, identified as maenads by the use of the tympanon and the thyrsus.

Indeed, comparable scenes featuring female figures saddles on Gryphons have been identified by the BA as of oriental character.<sup>56</sup> These observations permit us to propose an alternative interpretation of the remaining works, as the Gryphon scenes do not necessarily allude to the defeat of these creatures in order to seize their gold. Rather, they may represent an attempted capture, with the intention of training them for the benefit of the depicted figures. It is unsurprising that even if these horsemen/riders are identified as Arimaspians, this would not explain why there are so many scenes of Amazon busts and Gryphons in which these

<sup>53</sup> SANCHEZ SANZ 2019a, 694.

<sup>54</sup> BAVN 231167.

<sup>55</sup> BAVN 330676.

<sup>56</sup> BAVN 2204.



creatures do not appear to be confronting them but following them.<sup>57</sup> In this sense, the figures would already be acting in a companionate manner. In the pieces in which their gazes cross each other, however, they may be influencing each other's training process, as there seems to be no intentionality towards combat due to the calm character shown by their protagonists. Moreover, in numerous instances, the Gryphon is depicted in a full-length pose, rather than in the typical rampant position observed in *Griphomachias*. Instead, it is shown lying on its legs, conveying a submissive demeanor.

The specific compositional approach selected for these pieces makes the depiction of arms challenging yet does not impede their presence.<sup>58</sup> Consequently, their absence appears to reinforce the aforementioned interpretation. It is noteworthy that several terracotta Anatolian reliefs dating from the 6th century BC depict a bearded male horseman (with occasional references to female figures) pursuing a Gryphon. These figures are consistently unarmed and depicted in a tranquil state of mind.<sup>59</sup> It is possible that they allude to this same type of relationship with other peoples, such as the Arimaspians themselves, or to some kind of religious procession, perhaps even with an apotropaic meaning that we do not currently understand. This is exemplified in the sarcophagus of Hagia Triada,<sup>60</sup> wherein a divine chariot drawn by Gryphons bearing two female figures is depicted as a symbol of protection for the deceased.<sup>61</sup>

The image associated with Gryphons is remarkably consistent throughout antiquity, irrespective of the mythical context in which they appear, the period, or the medium. The Gryphon is an imaginary hybrid creature formed by fusing different real animals of a hostile nature. It is quadrupedal with the body of a lion, wings, the claws of a feline or raptor, the head of a raptor with a powerful beak and the tail of a snake.<sup>62</sup> They were dedicated to Apollo and represented a symbol of divinity and his cult, being attached to the chariot in which he crossed the firmament every day.<sup>63</sup>

The connection between Apollo and the Amazons is evident in the context of art; however, this association is even more pronounced when considering the cases of Dionysus and Artemis. These deities inherited the ancient role of "Mistress of the Gryphons," which was associated with the Great Mother<sup>64</sup> and Nemesis.<sup>65</sup> One of the paintings adorning the temple of Artemis Alfeia at Elis depicted the goddess on a Gryphon.<sup>66</sup> This relationship could be extended to Athena herself, as it is reported that the helmet of the statue presiding over the Parthenon was decorated with sphinxes and Gryphons.<sup>67</sup> The Gryphons were responsible for the protection of the wine krater of Dionysus. There are several

ceramic pieces that demonstrate the god riding the back of a Gryphon or pulling his chariot in scenes of *Gigantomachy*.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, the presence of Amazons utilising them as saddles in a multitude of representations, including the maenads themselves carrying the tympanon and the thyrsus, could be interpreted as a reference to the thiasus, the ecstatic retinue associated with Dionysus. This may be an allusion to the stories that transformed the Amazons into devoted participants.<sup>69</sup>

The reliefs demonstrate a distinct emphasis on symbolic and compositional elements, while adhering to established conventions and maintaining the fundamental categories of representation observed in vase painting. The same dichotomy between representations of Gryphons (4) and those that appear to depict a disparate relationship between Amazons and Gryphons (3) is evident. This may also indicate some form of collaboration or even worship of these mythical creatures, although there are no known reliefs that depict Amazons using them as saddles. It is notable that there are no examples of men and women facing these beings as apparent allies. However, there are pieces that indirectly depict the relationship between Amazons and Gryphons. One such piece is a rhython found in Tarentum (350–330 BC) whose prothorax shows the head of the creature and the upper part shows an Amazon bust.<sup>70</sup>

One of the bell-shaped reliefs depicts two female figures providing water to two Gryphons, who accept the offering by drinking peacefully while seated on their hind legs.<sup>71</sup> It is possible that the scene depicts a religious ceremony dedicated to the veneration of such mythical creatures; however, there are no written references to support this hypothesis. Therefore, it is equally plausible that the figures represent evidence of their training process. Furthermore, one of their forelegs is used to hold their own pottery sherds. The Gryphons present a novel representation, diverging from the conventional depiction of the species. They are depicted with a lion's head and body, and a snake's tail and wings. This scene is strikingly similar to one discovered on a stucco panel from a Roman villa (1st century AD),<sup>72</sup> which features a female figure with her upper torso uncovered and unarmed.

In this type of support, the Amazon figures adopt a symbolism closely linked to the most characteristic image found in other iconographic areas such as sculptures, mosaics or the rest of the reliefs dedicated to other episodes. This is in contrast to the specific canons that had predominated in vase painting since the 5th century BC, when oriental costume and the Phrygian cap were prevalent. In contrast, the *chitoniskos*<sup>73</sup> is notable for its depiction of the right breast in the traditional manner, a detail that is absent from vase painting. Indeed, it is only sporadically paired with the Phrygian cap, particularly in rhythons, as it is more prevalent for them to emerge solely with the distinctive hairstyle on stelae.

<sup>57</sup> Contrary to interpreting it only as a confrontation according to CABRERA BONET and MORENO CONDE (2014, 46).

<sup>58</sup> As can be seen, for example, in BAVN 230331, where a spear is shown.

<sup>59</sup> Anatolian terracotta fragment (AD 525–500). Mus. of Art and Archaeology. Univ. of Missouri.

<sup>60</sup> 14th century BC (Mus. Arq. Iraklio, Crete). ROBERTSON 1992, 30.

<sup>61</sup> WALGATE 2002, 11.

<sup>62</sup> Only on rare occasions is the head also a lion's head (BAVN 330676).

<sup>63</sup> SERVIUS HONORATUS, *COMMENTARY ON VIRGIL'S AENEID* 7. 27.

<sup>64</sup> SANCHEZ SANZ 2018, 223.

<sup>65</sup> ARMOUR 1995, 76.

<sup>66</sup> STRABO 8. 3, 12.

<sup>67</sup> PAUSANIAS 1. 24, 5.

<sup>68</sup> As saddles (BAVN 9337, 14042, etc.), yoked (BAVN 6987), etc.

<sup>69</sup> SENECA, *HERCULES FURENS* 467 ss.; NONNUS OF PANOPOLIS, *DIONYSIACA* 37. SOURVINOU-INWOOD (1985, 131–132) has related the Amazons to the Maenads through the cult of Artemis and their link to nature.

<sup>70</sup> Seattle Art Mus.

<sup>71</sup> Terracotta campanian relief (50 BC–100 AD, Br.Mus. 1805,0703.297).

<sup>72</sup> Art Inst. of Chicago.

<sup>73</sup> Also found in the Anatolian relief (525–500 BC).

Conversely, the continued utilisation of the oriental costume and Phrygian cap is observed only infrequently and is confined to the Scythian domain within vase painting.<sup>74</sup>

Indeed, the interest in the short chiton appears to facilitate its identification as Amazonian, particularly in comparison with the doubts generated by the Scythian costume, which is also associated with other groups such as the Arimaspians and Scythians. This is especially the case when we consider the most common conventions in terms of Amazon art in media other than vase painting. In the combat scenes, the use of swords (3)<sup>75</sup> is now the predominant weapon, superseding other options such as the sagaris,<sup>76</sup> peltas and even the labrys.<sup>77</sup> The presence of spears, which are a common feature of ceramics, is not currently known.

Conversely, the representations that appear to eschew any form of confrontation (5) once more espouse the idea of disarming. As liminal beings, the Gryphons' territory is located on the margins of the known world. Their aggressive nature can be seen as an additional manifestation of their characteristics related to the chaos and wildness associated with that context. It is unsurprising that tradition states that it was impossible to capture an adult specimen, and thus, it was necessary to search for offspring that their progenitors would defend from any stranger.<sup>78</sup> This assertion suggests that the Amazons were not the sole group to attempt such an incursion, and that the gold they sought was not the sole motivation for those who crossed into their territory. Indeed, Gryphons appear to have readily vanquished all other creatures, with the exception of lions and elephants, which they typically avoided.

It is important to note that the Griphomachy scenes do not feature the presence of canids, despite their recurrent appearance in representations of hunting. This is in contrast to the Arimaspians, who are depicted alongside Gryphons in hunts. It is unlikely that the canids were perceived as too dangerous, given that they were known to confront tigers and lions,<sup>79</sup> creatures that the Gryphons themselves feared. It may, therefore, be posited that the Griphomachias were not a representation of hunting for the capture and subsequent training of these creatures, but rather a depiction of combat against them. If we accept Elianus's account, this type of enterprise would be carried out with the offspring of the griffons, although there are no artistic examples of this, so that their subsequent use would be carried out after they had reached maturity. Indeed, in the reliefs depicting the encounter between Amazons and Gryphons,<sup>80</sup> the latter never act as riders, a role that is typically depicted in vase painting.

In the absence of the additional advantage of their mount,

<sup>74</sup> Gold crown at the necropolis of Bolshaya Bliznitsa (4th century BC).

<sup>75</sup> Rhython from Ruvo (300–250 BC, Br.Mus. 1856,1226.279a), rhython from southern Italy (350 BC, Oxford 1947.374), gold crown from Bliznitsa (4th c. BC, State Hermitage Mus.).

<sup>76</sup> Campanian relief (50 BC–100 AD) and gold crown from Bliznitsa (4th century BC, State Herm. Mus.).

<sup>77</sup> Both campanian reliefs (1st c. BC, BM Cat.Terracotta D613; 50 BC–100 AD).

<sup>78</sup> CLAUDIUS AELIANUS, *NATURA ANIMALIUM* 4. 27.

<sup>79</sup> House of the Amazons, Urfa (5th–6th century AD, Şanlıurfa Mosaic Mus.).

<sup>80</sup> Except for the Anatolian terracotta relief (525–500 BC), but it does not show a combat scene.

all Griphomachias demonstrate that female infantry warriors are at a disadvantage to their opponents. This is evidenced by the fact that they are invariably depicted as already on the ground, attempting to avoid imminent defeat. It is common practice for Amazonomachias to depict hoplites who have been vanquished in the face of superior horsemen. This is done to illustrate that their presence is necessary to improve the chances of victory and offset some of the inherent disadvantages associated with their feminine condition. At the same time, it increases the prestige of their enemies by also managing to prevail. This would illustrate the challenge of capturing them as adults, which excluded the involvement of canids in the Griphomachy scenes. However, this did not diminish the understanding that the Amazons were capable of training these creatures for their own benefit.

## CONCLUSION

Notwithstanding the challenges inherent in identifying these works, there appeared to be a well-established connection between the Amazons and these creatures, which were equally mythical in the Hellenistic collective imaginary. In the absence of details that could have been part of the work attributed to Aristaeas of Prokonos, the numerous iconographic references appear to corroborate this hypothesis, although it is challenging to ascertain the extent of their corroboration. The association of disparate characters, concepts, or locales of legendary provenance was a common phenomenon in the collective imaginary of antiquity. An example of this can be found in the stories that connect the Amazons, the Atlanteans and the Gorgons.<sup>81</sup> Therefore, it would not be implausible to accept this hypothesis, particularly when one considers the sources that place the Amazon kingdom in the territories located to the north of Pontus,<sup>82</sup> in close proximity to the Scythians, the Isedons and the Arimaspians. This circumstance alone provides sufficient justification for the existence of one or more traditions dedicated to the relationship between Amazons and Gryphons. The association of these figures with deities such as Apollo, Artemis and Dionysus lends further credence to this hypothesis, given the numerous examples that connect them directly or indirectly with the Amazon universe, even in the case of Athena herself.

One might posit that the scenes in which a female figure appears on the back of a Gryphon could represent maenads or divinities such as Artemis herself. However, this would not explain the large number of pieces in which the protagonists, clearly identified as Amazons, relate to these beings in an apparently friendly manner.

The significance of Gryphons in Scythian and Greco-Scythian art is well documented, which would have contributed to the growing interest in these scenes as export pieces.<sup>83</sup> However, apart from the wreath located at Bolshaya

<sup>81</sup> DIODORUS SICULUS 3. 54.

<sup>82</sup> PSEUDO-PLUTARCH. *Fluv.* 15; DIODORUS SICULUS 2. 45–46; EURIPIDES *Ion* 1140–1150; STRABO 11. 5. 3; PLINY, *NH.* 6. 35.

<sup>83</sup> METZGER 1951, 332. This is not to say that they identified with these specific mythical narratives beyond the colonial context, where they would have been used as an element of colonial identity construction opposed to "the others", the "barbarians" (MACDONALD 1987, 53–64; CABRERA BONET/MORENO CONDE 2014, 51).

Bliznitsa,<sup>84</sup> there are no further references to the conflict between Scythians and Gryphons. Instead, the surviving artefacts depict the hunting of other animals, primarily equids, deer and even lions (contrary to the words of Elianus). Alternatively, the Gryphons are shown in a sedentary and calm attitude. This is in contrast to the scenes depicted in Greek art. However, it does not preclude the possibility that mythical stories associated with the hunting of these creatures may have existed in Scythian culture, which could have led to an interest in such scenes.

An alternative hypothesis has been put forth to explain these scenes. It posits that the Greek craftsmen depicted these female figures not with the intention of portraying Amazons but rather barbarian deities. These deities, given their oriental character, would use the same attire, perhaps seeking to attract the interest of oriental markets in the 4th century BC.<sup>85</sup> However, this theory is based on the assertion that this theme emerged at that time or shortly before, when there is evidence of it since the end of the 6th century BC. This makes it challenging to accept that there was no established tradition linking Gryphons and Amazons in any way.

Furthermore, it is possible to establish a direct relationship with the wild, untamed and dangerous character that was attributed to many peoples or mythical creatures of a liminal nature. Such interactions could also serve to enhance certain aspects of their self-image (such as courage, fierceness, etc.) or the fame they enjoyed.<sup>86</sup> Gryphons and Amazons generated terror and respect in equal measure among the ancient Greeks, allowing them to establish a clear distinction between order and chaos, the civilised world and the dangers beyond, which had to be fought (and defeated) to prove their superiority.<sup>87</sup>

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- <sup>84</sup> Scythian female tomb of Bliznitsa (Taman, 4th century BC, State Hermitage Mus.).
- <sup>85</sup> SCHEFOLD 1934, 147; LIMC, *Amazones* 652.
- <sup>86</sup> CABRERA BONET and MORENO CONDE (2014, 51) argue for the reformulation of the concept of *eschatia* in the 4th century BC.
- <sup>87</sup> The same case as the mysteries of Eleusis or the inversion myths related to Dionysus, Athena or Artemis, often represented in festivities such as the Dionysian ones to proclaim order through chaos. In the Artemision at Ephesus there were four sculptures of Amazons made by the best Greek sculptors of the 5th century BC (PLINY, *NH.* 34. 53). This makes BENNET (1912, 31) emphasise their relationship with the cult of the goddess and especially with that temple.
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