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## ALEXANDER AND THE AMAZON QUEEN

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The meeting of the great conqueror with the queen of the Amazons, is perhaps the best-known non-event in the works of the Alexander historians.<sup>1</sup> As Justin (42.3.7) notes, the story was told by multiple (now lost) authors. Plutarch (*Alex.* 46.1–2) names those who treated the episode as if it were historical (Kleitarchos, Polykleitos, Onesikritos, Antigenes and Istros), adding that Aristoboulos, Chares, Ptolemy, Antikleides, Philon of Thebes, Philip of Theangela, Hekataios of Eretria, Philip the Chalkidian, and Douris of Samos either rejected or omitted it.<sup>2</sup> Justin (12.3.5–7), Curtius (6.5.25–32), and Diodorus (17.77.1–3) follow Kleitarchos (who may, in turn, have found the story in either Polykleitos or Onesikritos).<sup>3</sup> In 2001, Elizabeth Baynham published an excellent paper on “Alexander and the Amazons,” which must now be regarded as the starting-point for all future discussions.<sup>4</sup> There are, however, some problems that have yet to be resolved, and in this paper I attempt to fine-tune some issues and offer suggestions on the origin and development of the Thalestris episode.

<sup>1</sup> Curt. 6.5.25–32; Diod. 17.77.1–3; Justin 2.4.33; 12.3.5–7; 42.3.7 (cf. Oros. 3.18.5); Plut. *Alex.* 46; Strabo 11.5.4 C505.

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<sup>2</sup> See Hamilton 1969, 123–6 for discussion of the individual lost sources. Cf. Strabo 11.5.4 C505.

<sup>3</sup> For Kleitarchos’ probable use of Onesikritos see Pearson 1960, 225, 231; Heckel 2007, 270.

<sup>4</sup> Baynham 2001. Roisman 2017 provides a useful study of how the episode was treated by the extant historians.

## Thalestris and Alexander

The story goes that, while Alexander was in Hyrkania, he was visited by Thalestris, the queen of the Amazons, who had traveled for 35 days in order to reach him (cf. Strabo 11.5.4 C505 = Kleitarchos, *FGrH* 137 F16).<sup>5</sup> She was accompanied by 300 warriors, having left the rest of her army – its total strength is not given – behind at some point in the journey. When she arrived in Alexander’s camp, she leapt from her horse and approached Alexander, telling him that she had come to have sexual congress with him in the hope of producing an heir: a male child would be returned to Alexander; a female would remain with her and become the next Amazon queen. Alexander was agreeable and the two devoted thirteen days to love-making, after which Thalestris was satisfied that she had conceived and returned home. Only Justin (2.4.33), probably from a different source, adds that she died soon after returning home.

Although the episode is part of the description of Alexander’s moral decline and his assumption of oriental practices – the Amazons serve as a symbol of the dangers of the exotic East<sup>6</sup> – it also serves the purpose of highlighting the king’s role as world-conqueror by bringing him into contact with mythical elements on the fringes of the world, while at the same time reasserting his heroic stature.<sup>7</sup> As Walcott notes: “Wherever the Amazons are located by the Greeks, … it is always beyond the confines of the civilized world.”<sup>8</sup>

## Alexander and Herakles

Though both had encounters with Amazons, Herakles serves as a better model than Achilles.<sup>9</sup> Herakles was famous for traveling to the ends of the world (including the western edges: the cattle of Geryon and the apples of the Hesperides),

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Strabo 11.5.4 C505 (Κλείταρχος δέ φησι τὴν Θαληστρίαν ἀπὸ Κασπίων πυλῶν καὶ Θερμώδοντος ὄρμητεῖσαν ἐλθεῖν πρὸς Ἀλέξανδρον, εἰσὶ δ' ἀπὸ Κασπίας εἰς Θερμώδοντα στάδιοι πλείους ἑκακισχιλίων), discussed at greater length below.

<sup>6</sup> Daumas 1992.

<sup>7</sup> Baynham 2001, 122: “his meeting with an Amazon was an inevitable part of … contemporary *mythopoiesis*. Both Heracles and Achilles had encounters with Amazons; therefore Alexander must have one.” See also Heckel 2003, 155 n. 18. Cf. Arr. 5.3.1–4, citing Eratosthenes; Curt. 3.4.10; Diod. 17.83.1. Cf. Strootman 2022 for physical “boundaries.” See also Brown 1950, 150: “It was natural for a Greek to interpret Alexander for the Greek world in terms of these old stories. Alexander had gone beyond the bounds of geographical knowledge and entered the realm of fable. It was inevitable that there should be curiosity about the Amazons, and quite fitting that Alexander, like Theseus, should meet them. The Greek world would have been indignant not to find confirmation of the legends.” Similarly, Lane Fox 1973, 276: “certainly, the Amazons were too famous for romantics to admit that Alexander had not received them.”

<sup>8</sup> Walcott 1984, 42.

<sup>9</sup> See Heckel 2015.

and Alexander could be (and was) said to have followed in his footsteps in Libya (Arr. 3.3.1), at Aornos (12.7.12–13), and in the Punjab, where he encountered the Siboi (12.9.2), descendants of Herakles.<sup>10</sup> An encounter with an Amazon queen should not come as a surprise. Amongst the famous labors of Herakles was the securing of the girdle (belt: *ζωστήρ*) of the Amazon Hippolyte for King Eurystheus in order that he might give it to his daughter, Admete. Like all myths, the storyline of Herakles' ninth labor changed over time, but the version given by Apollodorus (2.5.9), who gave reasonably faithful accounts of stories taken from earlier mythographers, such as Pherecydes of Leros,<sup>11</sup> contains elements that are similar to Alexander's encounter with Thalestris. When Herakles arrived at Themiskyra, Hippolyte came to his camp to determine the purpose of his visit. Their interaction was friendly and she agreed to give him the girdle. Unfortunately, Hera intervened and roused the Amazons to battle, after which Herakles suspected betrayal and killed Hippolyte and took the belt. But the acquisition of the Amazon's belt was originally not intended to involve combat, which came about only as a result of the machinations of Hera, who harbored an implacable hatred for the hero. As Walcott states, “to defeat an Amazon by itself was insufficient to re-establish the supremacy of the male, for such a creature had to be sexually humiliated, which is why the ninth labour of Heracles was to secure the girdle of queen Hippolyte, the loss of this garment symbolizing her sexual submission....”<sup>12</sup> In another version, Melanippe, who was captured by Herakles, gave him her belt in exchange for her life (Diod. 4.16.4; cf. Justin 2.4.25, where he receives “the arms of the queen,” presumably Antiope). Alexander, by contrast, had a sexual relationship with Thalestris (who had come to Alexander for this very purpose) – the undoing of a woman's girdle (*ζώνη*) was, of course, a symbol of sexual possession – and the union of the two most powerful warriors, male and female (Diod. 17.77.3; cf. Curt. 6.5.30), was both an experiment in eugenics and a symbol of the attempt to merge eastern and western cultures. Thus Baynham regards it as “an early romantic expression of an aspiration, namely reconciliation between the conquerors and the barbarians ... that was to prove ... fleeting and illusory.”<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> For scepticism see Strabo 15.1.8 C688; Arr. 4.28.1–2; 5.3.1–4.

<sup>11</sup> See J. G. Frazier's introduction to the Loeb *Apollodorus*, vol. 1, pp. xviii–xx.

<sup>12</sup> Walcott 1984, 42. Mayor 2014, 254–5 notes that the *zoster* is a war-belt and not the same as the *zone* or girdle. But it is clear that removing (or having the Amazon queen surrender) the *zoster* is tantamount to “unmanning” her and there is at least a perception of seduction in the process. As Mayor 2014, 255 observes: “In many literary accounts, the encounter between Heracles and Hippolyte began amicably, then turned brutal through a misunderstanding. Some versions even promise love between equals before the battle erupts.”

<sup>13</sup> Baynham 2001, 126. Cf. Albaladejo Viveros 2005, 226 speaks of “una unión que además tendría el carácter propagandístico de presentar un acercamiento a los bárbaros y así hacer de Alejandro el soberano de un mundo mestizo, donde todas las etnias y demás elementos diferenciadores quedarían diluidos bajo su poder universal.”

Finally, Ogden compares Alexander's encounter with Thalestris (which was said to have occurred just after the theft and return of Bucephalus) with the legend of Hercules and the Echidna (Hdt. 4.8–10).<sup>14</sup> This mythical creature, half-woman and half-viper stole the mares yoked to Hercules' chariot while the hero slept. She refused to return the horses unless Hercules had sex with her, a demand with which the hero complied, and their liaison continued for some time. The Echidna – in a situation similar to that of Calypso and Odysseus – wished to keep Hercules with her. In the end, she declared that she was pregnant and asked Hercules what she should do with child (or, rather, children: she gave birth to three, though only one proved worthy of his father). Whether this in any way influenced the transfer of Amazon story from Central Asia to Hyrcania is uncertain.

### The historical event(s) that inspired the Amazon story

In 329/8 at the Iaxartes (Syr-darya) River, according to Arr. 4.15.1–3; Curt. 8.1.9 (cf. Plut. *Alex.* 46.1, 3), envoys from the king of the European Skythians – so called because they lived beyond the river (which the Alexander historians equated with the Tanais and regarded as the boundary between Europe and Asia<sup>15</sup>) – offered Alexander his daughter's hand in marriage. Alexander declined (Arr. 4.15.5), an eventuality the ambassadors were prepared for (Arr. 4.15.3: εἰ δὲ ἀποξιοῦ τὴν Σκυθῶν βασίλισσαν γῆμαι Ἀλέξανδρος),<sup>16</sup> but the Skythian king was nevertheless accepted as an ally. At the same time, Pharasmanes, ruler of Chorasmians,<sup>17</sup> arrived and entered into friendship with Alexander, adding that he would aid the Macedonians, if they wished to attack the Kolchians and the Amazons, whose territories bordered on his (Arr. 4.15.4–5), an offer that Alexander also declined, since he was committed to the campaign in India. The geographical confusion can be traced to Polykleitos of Larisa (Strabo 11.7.4 = *FGrH* 128 F7), one of the authors who gave credence to the Amazon story. Pharasmanes would certainly have known better.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Ogden 2021, 149–52. Cf. Stoneman 2008, 130.

<sup>15</sup> It is beyond the scope of this paper to investigate further Alexander's contemporaries' conception of geography and the location of the Amazons (on which see Hamilton 1971; Bosworth 1980, 377–9; Atkinson 1994, 185–9, all with additional literature; cf. Bowden 2021, 143 n. 51). Suffice it to say that confusion of the Iaxartes and the Tanais, on the one hand, and the placing of the Amazons north of Hyrcania and Parthia (as well as near the kingdom of the Chorasmians) contributed to view that Alexander could have encountered Thalestris in Central Asia.

<sup>16</sup> Βασίλισσα, like *regina*, can of course mean “queen” or “princess.” Hence, we cannot read too much into the term, though Tarn 1948, II 327 uses it as one of the underpinnings of his argument linking the Skythian *basilissa* with the Amazon queen.

<sup>17</sup> Heckel 2021, no. 887.

<sup>18</sup> Albaladejo Viveros 2005, 224 claims that Pharasmenes merely used the Amazon myth in order to gain Macedonian aid for his own expansion plans: “Farásmanes ...sabedor de algunas

Either of these events could have had some impact on the story of Alexander and Thalestris, though it is striking that in both cases Alexander had rejected the offers.

Tarn claims that the connection between the offer of the Skythian bride and the Amazon story “seems certain enough,” noting what he considered four points of similarity, which I quote in full:

- (1) the Queen of the Amazons came to Alexander παιδοποίας χάριν, as a foreign bride married for political reasons would; (2) Arrian calls the girl βασίλισσα, queen;
- (3) Pharasmanes’ reference to the Amazons as being his neighbours; (4) the original place of meeting of the Amazon Queen and Alexander was beyond the Jaxartes.<sup>19</sup>

This is far too rigid and simplistic. A. B. Bosworth doubts any such connection. “The most probable explanation is that Alexander was visited in Hyrcania by a native princess, probably of Dahan stock, with an entourage of female warriors.<sup>20</sup> The existence of such women among the Saca peoples of the east seems an established fact.... Onesicritus (*FGH* 134 F1) was probably the first to identify them with the Amazons, and Cleitarchus followed the tradition...”.<sup>21</sup> I do not see, however, why one should replace an attested Skythian princess with an imagined one “of Dahan stock,” except to restore Hyrkania as the location of the visit (on which, see below). Furthermore, although it has become clear that female warriors were common among the peoples of the steppes, it is as unlikely that a native princess would have been accompanied by an all-female band of attendants as it is that the Amazons existed in Alexander’s day.<sup>22</sup>

Diodorus, Curtius, and Justin, as we have seen, followed Kleitarchos in locating the Thalestris episode in Hyrkania, to the southeast of the Caspian. But, although Kleitarchos is generally regarded as one of the earlier Alexander historians,

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tradiciones griegas, utilizó el mito de las mujeres guerreras como sueño al objeto de poner a su disposición el ejército macedonio y así poder ampliar sus dominios territoriales a costa de sus vecinos.”

<sup>19</sup> Tarn 1948, II 327.

<sup>20</sup> So Lane Fox 1973, 276.

<sup>21</sup> Bosworth 1995, 103, followed by Baynham 2001, 122; Mayor 2014, 327–8; cf. Winiarczyk 2007, 235. On the location of the Dahai see Olbrycht 2015, 270, 272; Minardi 2023, 786, Fig. 62.2. Those who fought at Gaugamela (Arr. 3.11.3; Curt. 4.12.6) had fled with Bessos (3.28.8–9; Curt. 7.4.6; cf. 6.3.9), and Alexander’s first encounter with them was in Sogdiana. It seems more likely that Alexander would have contacted them at the Iaxartes or in Sogdiana than in Hyrkania. See Olbrycht 2022, 227–89 for the Dahai in the reign of Alexander, and their later migration in the direction of Hyrkania and Parthia.

<sup>22</sup> The Greeks (and even some modern writers) simply could not resist the fantasy of organized bands of warrior women or wars between women (Douris of Samos, *FGH* 76 F52). Mayor 2014, 329, under the heading “Alexander’s Amazon Sister,” reports as if it were factual, Polyaeenus’ story (8.60) that Kynnane slew in hand-to-hand combat an Illyrian queen, adding that she did this in 343 BC – when she was only fifteen!

he did not accompany the expedition, nor did he even begin to write his account until after the king's death. Instead, he relied on earlier published works and eyewitness sources. Plutarch, *Alex.* 46.1, however, after referring to Alexander's wounds in Sogdiana and his pursuit of the Skythians beyond the Oxartes (thus Aristoboulos' form of the name<sup>23</sup>), writes:

Here (ἐνταῦθα), most writers, among whom are Kleitarchos, Polykleitos, Onesikritos, Antigenes and Istros say, the Amazon [queen] came to Alexander, but Aristoboulos, Chares the usher, Ptolemy, Antikleides, Philon the Theban, and Philip of Theangela, in addition to Hekataios of Eretria, Philip the Chalkidian and Douris of Samos say this is a fiction.

Ἐνταῦθα δὲ πρὸς αὐτὸν ἀφικέσθαι τὴν Αμαζόνα οἱ πολλοὶ λέγουσιν, ὃν καὶ Κλείταρχος ἔστι καὶ Πολύκλειτος καὶ Ὄντσικριτος καὶ Ἀντιγένης καὶ Ἰστρος. Ἀριστόβουλος δὲ καὶ Χάρης ὁ εἰσαγγελεὺς καὶ Πτολεμαῖος καὶ Ἀντικείδης καὶ Φύλων ὁ Θηβαῖος καὶ Φύλιππος ὁ Θεαγγελεὺς, πρὸς δὲ τούτοις Ἐκαταῖος ὁ Ἐρετριεὺς καὶ Φύλιππος ὁ Χαλκιδεὺς καὶ Δοῦρις ὁ Σάμιος πλάσμα φασι γεγονέναι τοῦτο.

There is considerable debate concerning whether ἐνταῦθα ("here") means "at the Iaxartes," or "in Parthia," since Plutarch's last comment on Alexander's itinerary was that he had moved to Parthia (*Alex.* 45.1). C. B. Welles<sup>24</sup> (thus also Bosworth and Roisman)<sup>25</sup> argues that Plutarch (*Alex.* 46.1) refers back to events in Parthia: his chronological narrative generally coincides well with that of the Vulgate authors and is probably based on Kleitarchos; in Chap. 45 he begins to discuss the king's degeneration (of which his orientalism is an example) and, in his thematic arrangement, temporarily muddles the order of events. Welles points out that Chap. 48 goes back to the Philotas affair, which took place well before the Skythian campaign at the Iaxartes. Thus ἐνταῦθα brings us back to events in Parthia. But Hamilton<sup>26</sup> appears to be correct in taking Plutarch to mean that the alleged meeting of Alexander and Thalestris occurred at the Iaxartes,<sup>27</sup> since the mention of the river provides an antecedent

<sup>23</sup> Since Plutarch was following Aristoboulos at this point, he probably found in that author a reference to the fictitious Amazon episode, which he then expanded with references to other authors.

<sup>24</sup> Welles 1963, 338 n.2. Cf. F. Gisinger 1952, 1705 who writes: "So wird ἐνταῦθα...nicht etwa auf den kurz vorher...genannten Ὀρεξάρτης-Τάναις sich beziehen, sondern auf εἰς Ὑρκανίαν in c. 44." But Gisinger himself noted that that Plutarch, *Alex.* 45 "beginnt mit Ἐντεῦθεν εἰς τὴν Παρθικὴν ἀναζεύξας κτλ." Hence, it makes no sense that ἐνταῦθα would refer to Hyrcania rather than Parthia, if we accept his argument. Gisinger has at least hinted at the obvious, that the word would normally refer to the previously mentioned place.

<sup>25</sup> Bosworth 1995, 102; Roisman 2016, 256.

<sup>26</sup> Hamilton 1969, 123. Cf. Tarn 1948, II 328; Pearson 1960, 77.

<sup>27</sup> Albaladejo Viveros 2005, 219 takes Plut. *Alex.* 46.1 to mean that Onesikritos placed the Amazon episode at the Iaxartes ("diversos autores—entre los que se encontraba el propio Onesícrito—situaron la entrevista ... en la región ubicada al norte del río Yaxarte"). Tarn believes

for ἐνταῦθα.<sup>28</sup> Plutarch (*Alex.* 46.3) uses a letter to Antipatros that related the offer of a Skythian bride<sup>29</sup> but did not mention the Amazon, as proof that the latter story was false. Hence, it was clear in Plutarch's mind that there was a link between the Skythian bride and the Amazon queen in the development of the Thalestris story; in much the same way, he uses a letter of Alexander to disprove the story that the sea withdrew before Alexander in Pamphylia.<sup>30</sup>

Most recently, Pelling has reasserted the view that ἐνταῦθα refers to Parthia – which Alexander had just reached in Plutarch's narrative (45.1) before the digression on his wounding and illness at the Iaxartes – and he argues that “for P[lutarch] the meeting did not take place at all, in any of these places; he is referring to the location given by most authors.”<sup>31</sup> It is certainly correct that Plutarch did not believe the Amazon story; indeed, he omitted it in the course of his earlier narrative. The vulgate authors agree that two episodes occurred in Hyrkania, and they report them in the same sequence: (1) the theft and recovery of Boukephalas (Diod. 17.76.3–8; Curt. 6.5.17–20; cf. Justin 12.3.4, doubtless in Trogus); (2) the visit of the Amazon queen (Diod. 17.77.1–3; Curt. 6.5.24–32; Justin 12.3.5–7); and then a third, the king's adoption of Persian dress and practices (Diod. 17.77.4–7; Curt. 6.6.1–11; Justin 12.3.8–12) when the army reached Parthia. Plutarch, who also followed the Kleitarchan tradition in many places, records the king's entry into Hyrkania (*Alex.* 44.1) and then the theft of Boukephalas (44.3–5); after this he says that Alexander moved to Parthia (45.1; cf. Curt. 6.5.32), where the adoption of oriental ways occurred (45.1–2), thus omitting the Amazon episode entirely. If ἐνταῦθα refers back to his earlier narrative (which had Alexander adopting Persian dress in Parthia), the episode, which Plutarch gave no credence to, would have come out of chronological and geographical sequence.<sup>32</sup> Instead, Plutarch (at 45.5) began a digression on Alexander's wounds and other tribulations.

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it was Kleitarchos who “moved” the encounter to Hyrkania (Strabo 11.5.4 C505). If this is true, Kleitarchos may have been “correcting” the version he found in Polykleitos or Onesikritos. Curtius 6.5.24–32 and 8.1.9 shows that shows that Kleitarchos did not connect the Amazon and Skythian princess episodes.

<sup>28</sup> Just as ἐνταῦθα at *Alex.* 44.3 refers to the last place mentioned, i.e. Hyrkania (44.1) and the Hyrkanian sea (44.2); cf. *Alex.* 37.3, referring to Persis, which occurs at 37.1.

<sup>29</sup> Monti 2023, 172–4.

<sup>30</sup> Plut. *Alex.* 17.6–8; cf. Monti 2023, 137ff.

<sup>31</sup> Pelling 2025, 343. I am grateful to Professor Pelling for sending me a copy of his commentary on Plutarch's *Alexander* in advance of publication. This has been an immense help to me in the preparation of the revision and expansion of my commentary on Justin's account of Alexander (Yardley / Heckel 1997). On this particular point I respectfully disagree with his conclusions.

<sup>32</sup> Alexander passed the Caspian Gates in his pursuit of Darius, eventually (after that king's death) he entered Parthia (Curt. 6.2.12); from there he left the main road and invaded Hyrkania (Curt. 6.4.2), where the theft of Boukephalas and the Amazon episode occurred, and thereafter re-entered Parthia farther to the east (Curt. 6.5.32; at 6.5.1 he had already reached the farthest part of Hyrkania: *ultima Hyrcaniae intraverat*).

Chapter 46 is a continuation of this digression, and only at 47.1 does Plutarch return to the discussion of the king's relationship with his troops. And, even at this point, his narrative is utterly confused as he speaks of leaving the greater part of his army behind, as he made his way into Hyrkania.

If Pelling's argument is correct, the fact that Kleitarchos is known to have located the Amazon episode in Hyrkania (*FGrH* 137 F16) would appear to suggest that the other four historians who were said to have believed the story (One-sikritos, Polykleitos, Antigenes, and Istros) agreed with him. But Strabo (11.5.4) disagrees, noting that:

As to where they are now, only a few declare it – without proof and unbelievably – such as in the matter of Thalestria, who was the leader of the Amazons and with whom, they say, Alexander associated in Hyrkania, and had intercourse with her for the sake of offspring, but this is not agreed to. The historical writers who are most careful about the truth do not say this, those whose are most trustworthy do not record it, *and those who do speak about it do not say the same thing*. Kleitarchos says that Thalestria set forth from the Kaspian Gates and Thermudon, and came to Alexander, but from the Kaspian to Thermudon is more than 6,000 stadia. (Roller 2014, 487–8).

ὅπου δὲ νῦν εἰσίν, ὀλίγοι τε καὶ ὀνταποδείκτως καὶ ἀπίστως ἀποφαίνονται. καθάπερ καὶ περὶ Θαληστρίας, ἣν Ἀλεξανδρῷ συμμίξαι φασιν ἐν τῇ Υρκανίᾳ καὶ συγγενέσθαι τεκνοποίιας χάριν, δυναστεύουσαν τῶν Ἀμαζόνων. οὐ γάρ ὁμολογεῖται τοῦτο. ἀλλὰ τῶν συγγραφέων τοσούτων ὅντων, οἱ μάλιστα τῆς ἀληθείας φροντίσαντες οὐκ εἰρήκασιν, οὐδὲ οἱ πιστευόμενοι μάλιστα οὐδενὸς μέμνηται τοιούτου, οὐδὲ οἱ εἰπόντες τὰ αὐτὰ εἰρήκασι. ὁ Κλείταρχος δέ φησι τὴν Θαληστρίαν ἀπὸ Κασπίων πυλῶν καὶ Θερμώδοντος ὄρμηθεῖσαν ἐλθεῖν πρὸς Ἀλεξανδρόν, εἰσὶ δὲ ἀπὸ Κασπίας εἰς Θερμώδοντα στάδιοι πλειόνυς ἐκακισχλίων.

While it is true that Kleitarchos underestimated the width of the “isthmus” dividing the Caspian and Black Sea (see *FGrH* 137 F13 = Strabo 11.1.5 C491), Strabo's point, I believe, is not to debunk the Amazon episode by stressing the great distance Thalestris would have had to travel; 6,000 stadia is hardly an impossible distance for mounted steppe warriors to cover in 35 days. What Strabo was attempting to establish was he homeland of the Amazons, both in his own time and during Alexander's campaign. He says that, according to Kleitarchos, Thalestris traveled “from the Caspian Gates *and* Thermudon” (ἀπὸ Κασπίων πυλῶν καὶ Θερμώδοντος ὄρμηθεῖσαν) which should not be taken to mean “from Thermudon *via* the Caspian Gates.” Instead Strabo criticizes Kleitarchos for locating the Amazons in two different places, which he noted were 6,000 stades apart. There is support for this view in Curtius, who says (6.4.16–17) that they lived near the Caspian and the Leukosyrians, although he later (6.5.24) says they came from Themiskyra and the Thermudon river.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>33</sup> See Atkinson 1994, 189.

When Plutarch wrote his digression on Alexander's wounds in Sogdiana and the pursuit of the Skythians beyond the Iaxartes, he was following Aristoboulos' account, as is clear from his use the variant Orexartes.<sup>34</sup> And it may have been Aristoboulos who introduced the fact that it was in this place that Alexander's meeting was thought to have occurred (though he himself did not believe it). At any rate, if Plutarch really did mean to say that it was in Parthia that the alleged meeting of Alexander and Thalestris took place, he was wrong on at least two counts: Kleitarchos did not say that event occurred in Parthia (cf. Curt. 6.5.32: *tum illa regnum suum, rex Parthienen petiverunt*); nor, as Strabo tells us, was there unanimous agreement among those who treated the story as historical.

### The Amazon story and the intellectual culture at Alexander's court

The story seems to have been created around 329–328 BC for the sake of flattering the king and entertaining the troops, especially, though not exclusively, during one of the times spent in winter quarters. Certainly poetry that amounted to abject flattery circulated in the camp throughout Alexander's expedition; for we know of the execrable poet Choirilos of Iasos, who composed an epic poem in which Alexander appeared as Achilles. The king's reaction was blunt and dismissive: "I would rather be Homer's Thersites than the Achilles of Choirilos."<sup>35</sup> In fact, there was no shortage of men who made a living (as parasites) entertaining audiences at symposia and exaggerating the deeds of their royal patron.<sup>36</sup> The philosopher (or sophist) Anaxarchos belonged to this group, as did Agis of Argos and Kleon of Syracuse;<sup>37</sup> Anaxarchos compared Alexander with Herakles and Dionysos, sons of Zeus who had become gods (Arr. 4.10.6–7), as did others (Arr. 4.8.3). Kleon, who rivaled Choirilos in the poor quality of his verses, and Agis were involved in orchestrating the attempt to introduce *proskynesis* at Alexander's court (Curt. 8.5.10–21). Plutarch speaks of "other sophists and flatterers" (*Alex.* 53.1: ἄλλους σοφιστὰς καὶ κόλακας).<sup>38</sup>

<sup>34</sup> *FGrH* 139 F25 = Arr. 3.30.7, where Ἰαξάρτην is Palmer's emendation; MSS Ὄρξάντην. Arr. 7.16.3 has Ὄξυάρτης. Both may be corruptions of Ὄρεξάρτης. Aristoboulos was probably also responsible for the name Zariaspa, which was the same place as Baktra.

<sup>35</sup> As Anson 2021, 26 n.13 shows, this must be taken to mean that it was the quality of Choirilos' work that Alexander objected to, not the comparison with Achilles.

<sup>36</sup> Arr. 4.8.3 calls them οῖοι δὴ ἄνδρες διέφθειράν τε ἀεὶ καὶ οὐποτε παύσονται ἐπιτρίβοντες τὰ τῶν ἀεὶ βασιλέων πράγματα.

<sup>37</sup> See Heckel 2021, nos. 28, 92, 604.

<sup>38</sup> Among these we may include the pankratiast, Dioxyppos (Aristoboulos, *FGrH* 139 F47; further references in Heckel 2021, no. 398). For artists and actors in Alexander's entourage see Tritte 2009, 122–9; Pownall 2021; Tarn 1948, II 55–61 regards virtually all the stories linking Alexander with heroes and mythical characters as originating with the poetasters, which is probably an exaggeration.

Nikoboule (*FGrH* 127 F2 = *Athen.* 13.537d) claims that “all the actors strove to keep Alexander entertained at dinner” (*παρὰ τὸ δεῖπνον πάντες οἱ ἀγωνισταὶ ἐσπούδαζον τέρπειν τὸν βασιλέα*), something that is echoed in *Curt.* 6.2.5 (*non contentus artificum quos e Graecia exciverat turba*). These performers offered the usual fare of Greek tragedy, comedy, and epic poetry, but like others of their ilk they understood the financial benefits flattering the king. Ephippos (*FGrH* 126 F5) adds that Alexander regularly wore the purple robe of Ammon or appeared in a lion-skin, carrying the club of Herakles.<sup>39</sup> In 328, at Marakanda, Pranichos (or Pierion) recited a poem about a Macedonian defeat at the hands of barbarians,<sup>40</sup> prompting Kleitos to upbraid the king for allowing such criticism of Macedonians, especially in the presence of other barbarians (*Plut. Alex.* 50.8–9). The majority of scholars believe that the subject of this poem is the defeat of the forces of Andromachos, Karanos, and Menedemos (as well as Pharnouches, who appears to have been the scape-goat, at least in some versions) at the hands of Spitamenes at the Polytimetus river (*Arr.* 4.5.2–6.3; *Curt.* 7.7.31–9, 9.21; *Metz Epit.* 13).<sup>41</sup> This was, however, a serious setback in the campaign to subdue Baktria-Sogdiana, and Alexander, who took the news hard (*ἥλγησέ τε τῷ πάθει*), had honored the Macedonian dead (*Curt.* 7.9.12; *Metz Epit.* 13). Despite the feeling among some of troops that his orientalizing policies were elevating the barbarians at their expense, it is inconceivable that Alexander would have allowed a poet at his court to make a mockery of that defeat. It is far more likely that the poem referred to the death of a small contingent of Macedonians, including some of the *paides basilikoi*, in the vicinity of Baktra (Zariaspa), and that it regaled the heroic last stand of the harpist Aristonikos.

In the city of Zariaspa, there were a few of the Companion cavalry, left there as invalids with Python son of Sosicles, who had been put in charge of the royal retinue at Zariaspa, and Aristonicus the harpist. On learning of the Scythian raid, as they had now recovered and could bear arms and mount horseback, they assembled about eighty mercenary cavalry, who had been left behind to garrison Zariaspa, and some of the King’s pages, and sallied out against the Massagetae. ... Spitamenes and the Scythians caught them in an ambush, where they lost seven Companions, and sixty mercenary cavalry. Aristonicus the harpist died there, with more courage than a harpist might have. Python was wounded and taken alive by the Scythians (*Arr.* 4.16.6–7; Loeb tr.).

ἵσαν δὲ ἐν τοῖς Ζαριάσποις νόσῳ ὑπολειμμένοι τῶν ἑταίρων ιππέων οὐ πολλοὶ καὶ ἔνν τούτοις Πείθων τε ὁ Σωσικλέους, ἐπὶ τῆς βασιλικῆς θεραπείας τῆς ἐν Ζαριάσποις τεταγμένος, καὶ Αριστόνικος ὁ κιθαρῳδός. Καὶ οὗτοι αἰσθόμενοι τῶν Σκυθῶν τὴν καταδρομήν (ἥδη γάρ ἐκ τῆς νόσου ἀναρρωσθέντες ὅπλα τε ἔφερον καὶ τῶν ὑπῶν

<sup>39</sup> Doubted by Anson 2021, 17.

<sup>40</sup> *Plut. Alex.* 50.8: ἥδετο ποιήματα Πρανίχου τινός, ὃς δέ φασιν ἔνιοι, Πιερίωνος. “The verses of a certain Pranichos, or as some say, Pierion, were sung.” This does not mean that composer himself recited his work.

<sup>41</sup> For example, Schachermeyr 1949, 299; Hamilton 1969, 141; Carney 1981, 155–7 (speculative); Bosworth 1995, 57.

έπέβαινον) ξυναγαγόντες τούς τε μισθοφόρους ιππέας ἐς ὄγδοήκοντα, οἱ ἐπὶ φυλακῇ τῶν Ζαριάσπων ὑπολειειμμένοι ἦσαν, καὶ τῶν παίδων τινὰς τῶν βασιλικῶν ἐκβοηθοῦσιν ἐπὶ τοὺς Μασσαγέτας. .... ἐνεδρευθέντες πρὸς Σπιταμένους καὶ τῶν Σκυθῶν τῶν μὲν ἑταίρων ἀποβάλλουσιν ἐπτά, τῶν δὲ μισθοφόρων ιππέων ἔξήκοντα. Καὶ Αριστόνικος ὁ κιθαρῳδὸς αὐτοῦ ἀποθνήσκει, οὐ κατὰ κιθαρῳδὸν ἀνὴρ ἀγαθὸς γενόμενος. Πείθων δὲ τρωθεὶς ζῶν λαμβάνεται πρὸς τῶν Σκυθῶν.

Arrian emphasizes the *arete* of the harpist; Plutarch (*Mor.* 334e–f) says that Aristonikos died fighting gallantly (εἶπεσε λαμπρῶς ἀγωνισάμενος) and that Alexander had a bronze statue of him erected at Delphi, depicting the man with a harp in one hand and a spear in the other. The poem, a kind of mock epic, must have focused on the virtue of Aristonikos, and only an over-sensitive person, as Kleitos was at the time, could have found fault with it because it came in the context of a defeat at the hands of the barbarians. Many “war heroes” died in losing causes. Furthermore, either in India (unlikely) or at Ecbatana (probably), a certain Python was supposed to have produced a play titled *Agen* (in which Agen was a pseudonym for Alexander, and Harpalos appeared as Pallides) which dealt with Harpalos’ malfeasance and his flight to Athens. Contrary to his disbelief upon learning of Harpalos’ first flight, Alexander was later prepared to allow the ridiculing of his faithless friend in the Macedonian camp.<sup>42</sup>

Nor was the entertainment confined to the works of poets and sophists. Historians also made a habit of reading their works in advance of publication. It is virtually certain that Alexander heard (or read) Kallisthenes’ work in advance of publication, and that he allowed flattering untruths to go unchallenged.<sup>43</sup> Several in the king’s entourage were preparing first drafts of histories that would be published after Alexander’s death. Plutarch (*Alex.* 76.3) tells us that in his final days, Alexander listened to Nearchos’ report of his voyage (presumably what formed the basis of his *Indike*), just as he had done in Karmania (Plut. *Alex.* 68.1). These were clearly records kept by Nearchos during his voyages, though they undoubtedly include some sensational elements. Lucian (*How to Write History* 12 = *FGrH* 139 T4) alleges that, as they were sailing down the Hydaspes River, Aristoboulos read Alexander a passage from the history he was compiling, in which Alexander and Poros engaged in single combat. The king is said to have grabbed his “book” and thrown it into the river, chastising him for this untruth and also for claiming that an elephant could be killed by a single throw of the javelin.<sup>44</sup> Plutarch (*Alex.* 46.4–5)

<sup>42</sup> For Python’s *Agen* see Snell 1964; Sutton 1980a-b; for the historical context see Heckel 2016, 226. But Trible 2009, 128 suggests the play was performed in Athens.

<sup>43</sup> Plut. *Alex.* 17.8 uses a letter of Alexander (Monti 2023, F2) to show that the sea did not miraculously recede for Alexander in Pamphylia, though this should not be taken as a deliberate correction of Kallisthenes. See also Pelling 2025, 212 on Plut. *Alex.* 17.6.

<sup>44</sup> Albaladejo Viveros 2020, 108 n.12 remarks: “This event never took place, because Aristobulus’ writings date from long after the death of Alexander.” The story is probably apocryphal, but it may support the view that those who published after Alexander’s death were already working on their histories (and reading early drafts) during the king’s lifetime.

mentions that, when Onesikritos read his account of the Amazon queen to Lysimachos, who was by now king of Thrace, the latter remarked: “where was I when this happened?”<sup>45</sup> But Onesikritos’ history was published much earlier; for it is virtually certain that Kleitarchos (who wrote c.310, if not earlier) used it, and, indeed, early versions were composed “on the fly,” so to speak, during Alexander’s lifetime. Thus Pearson comments:

Lucian, in his essay on “How to write history,” takes him as an example of the flatterer who writes to please the great man of the hour. “The historian who writes with an eye only to immediate success,” says Lucian, “must be reckoned among the flatterers; and history rejected them a long time ago.” To illustrate his meaning he goes on: “They tell this story too of Alexander, that he said: ‘How pleasant it would be, Onesicritus, if I could come back to life for a little while after death, so as to see the reactions of people then they read these things. Do not be surprised if, for the present, they praise and accept them, because they think, each one of them, that by this means they have an attractive bait to hook and land our favour’.”<sup>46</sup>

Alexander was both familiar with Onesikritos’ work and recognized it as flattery. Nearchos apparently attempted to correct Onesikritos’ lies about being admiral of the fleet, when he was merely the chief helmsman (cf. Strabo 15.1.28 = *FGrH* 134 T10: *τῶν παραδόξων ἀρχικυβερνήτην*).<sup>47</sup> How many lies Onesikritos told during the king’s lifetime (and in the presence of others) is, of course, unknowable.<sup>48</sup> We might add the Thessalians, Medios and Polykleitos (one of those who reported the story of the Amazon queen) to the list of flatterers who doubtless voiced exalted the deeds of Alexander at court.<sup>49</sup> Plut. *Mor.* 65c–d (= *FGrH* 129 T5) says of the former: *ἢν δ' ὁ Μήδιος τοῦ περὶ τὸν Ἀλέξανδρον χοροῦ τῶν κολάκων οὗν ἔξαρχος καὶ σοφιστὴς κορυφαῖος ἐπὶ τοὺς ἀρίστους συντεταμένων*.

Most of the stories about flatterers of all stripes involve the rejection of their claims. Thus Monti remarks: “From Plutarch it might be inferred that the figure of Alexander as mythicized already within his court, if the geographical area in which he was at that time had led some historians to invent the visit of the queen of the Amazons... But it is indeed the king who corrects the invented rumour by telling Antipater he had received the visit of the king of Scythians.”<sup>50</sup> I agree with the first sentence, and indeed this is an inference supported by other examples noted

<sup>45</sup> Lysimachos took the title of king no earlier than 305, and Onesikritos may no longer have been alive at that time (see the doubts of Pearson 1960, 84–5). But Lysimachos and Onesikritos are linked, as “philosophers,” with the Indian Kalanos (*FGrH* 132 F17; also Arr. 7.3.4), and if Lysimachos heard Onesikritos’ account of the Amazons, it may have been during Alexander’s lifetime.

<sup>46</sup> Pearson 1960, 86.

<sup>47</sup> For the relationship of Onesikritos, Nearchos, and Kleitarchos, see Heckel 2007, 267–71.

<sup>48</sup> On Onesikritos see Brown 1949; Müller 2014, 58–65. For other “historians” who reported gossip and flattered the king see Pearson 1960, 50–77.

<sup>49</sup> Pearson 1960, 68–77.

<sup>50</sup> Monti 2023, 173.

above. But the claim that “it is … the king who corrects the invented rumour” is Plutarch’s inference. Alexander merely fails to mention the Amazon episode. Claims that certain sensational stories or comments were rejected – intended to both discredit the flatterers themselves and demonstrate that Alexander remained level-headed – were made by literary opponents, and often ascribed to Alexander himself. But their very existence shows that lies and exaggerations were staples of conversation and performance at the Macedonian court, and actually welcomed by the king and many of his courtiers.<sup>51</sup> Kallisthenes, one of the worst offenders in the early stages, had an epiphany and, paradoxically, became the voice of the “conscientious objectors,”<sup>52</sup> only to meet an unhappy end. But, again, his objections demonstrate the extent of Alexander-idolatry. Alexander himself, who was pleased to hear himself addressed as the son of Ammon, compared with Herakles and Dionysos, was doubtless not averse to rumors that he impregnated the Amazon queen, or indeed that she sought him out for this very purpose.<sup>53</sup>

It is, therefore, not unlikely that the story of the Amazon queen was another creation of Alexander’s sycophants, whatever genre they employed in the service of their flattery. The news of the proffered Skythian bride and of Pharasmanes’ proposed expedition against the Amazons gave rise to a story that both entertained the troops and flattered the king. The fiction that Thalestris was desirous of meeting the greatest of all living men for the purpose of mating with him, that her appearance was both exotic and provocative, and that she engaged in a sexual marathon lasting thirteen days (being more eager for sex than Alexander), must have had great appeal for both the soldiers and their commanders.<sup>54</sup>

### Atropates and his Amazons

This brings us to a much later episode, which at first sight looks as if it may have provided the blueprint for the Amazon story. In the autumn of 324, Atropates,

<sup>51</sup> Arr. 4.12.1 says that Kallisthenes, by opposing the views of the flatterers (in this case, Anaxarchos) “greatly annoyed” Alexander.

<sup>52</sup> See Heckel 2020, 210–11. For rivalry among intellectuals at the court see Borza 1981.

<sup>53</sup> Bosworth 1996, 98–132 shows that Alexander was favorably disposed to such flattery, noting that “the most important element of the flattery is the comparison between Alexander and the divine. It centred on the figures of Heracles and the Dioscuri…” (1996, 101). I would go so far as to suggest that Kallisthenes, who was one of “Alexander’s staff,” as Bosworth 1996, 130 calls his propagandists and *kolakes*, would have mentioned the Amazon episode, if it had occurred in Hyrkania, when he was still creating the king’s image. But, by 329/8, Kallisthenes was already at odds with his patron, and his account of events in Baktria/Sogdiana may never have been circulated.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Pelling 2025, 342, who suggests at a visit from some local queen “with an armed retinue” … “would certainly make an impression, and very likely generate good-natured salacious imaginings among the men.”

the satrap of the Medes, brought one hundred women, mounted on horseback and dressed as warriors, to Alexander at Ecbatana, telling him that they were Amazons.

They say that there Atropates, the satrap of Media, gave him a hundred women, saying that they were Amazons; they were equipped like cavalry troopers, except that they carried axes instead of spears, and small targets instead of shields. Some say their right breast was smaller, and was uncovered in battle. According to the story Alexander sent them away from the army, in case they suffered any outrage from the Macedonians or the barbarians troops, but he told them to inform their queen that he would come to see her to get children by her. This, however, neither Aristobulus nor Ptolemy nor any other reliable author on such matters has attested (Arr. 7.13.2–3; Loeb tr.).

ἐνταῦθα λέγουσιν ὅτι Ἀτροπάτης ὁ τῆς Μηδίας σατράπης γυναικας ἑκατὸν αὐτῷ ἔδωκεν, ταύτας φάσκων εἶναι τῶν Αμαζόνων, καὶ ταύτας σκευῇ ἀνδρῶν ἵππεων ἐσταλμένας, πλήν γε δὴ ὅτι πελέκεις ἀντὶ δοράτων ἐφόρουν καὶ ἀντὶ ἀσπίδων πέλτας. Οἱ δὲ καὶ τὸν μαστὸν λέγουσιν ὅτι μείονα εἶχον τὸν δεξιόν, ὃν δὴ καὶ ἔξω εἶχον ἐν ταῖς μάχαις. Ταύτας μὲν δὴ ἀπαλλάξαι τῆς στρατιᾶς Αλέξανδρον, μή τι νεωτερισθείη κατ’ αὐτὰς ἐξ ὑβριν πρὸς τῶν Μακεδόνων ἡ βαρβάρων. Κελεῦσαι δὲ ἀπαγγεῖλαι πρὸς τὴν βασιλισσαν σφῶν ὅτι αὐτὸς ἥξει πρὸς αὐτὴν παιδοποιησμένος. Ταῦτα δὲ οὔτε Αριστόβουλος οὔτε Πολεμαῖος οὔτε τις ἄλλος ἀνέγραψεν ὅστις ικανὸς ὑπὲρ τῶν τηλικούτων τεκμηριώσαι.

Clearly this story has a number of similarities with that of Alexander and Thalestris, and it too has no support in the reputable primary historians.<sup>55</sup> On its face value, the story is implausible: could Atropates actually have tried to pass off these women as real Amazons? Would Alexander not have been insulted by this attempt to dupe him? And, if they were at least genuine warrior women, perhaps Scythians, though clearly not real Amazons, it is surprising that Alexander would have been concerned about keeping them safe from sexual abuse (*ὕβρις*) by the troops. Arrian (7.13.6) goes on to say: “If Atropates did show Alexander any women riders on horseback, I think they were some other barbarian women, taught to ride, whom he exhibited, dressed in the traditional Amazon fashion” (εἰ δὲ ἵππικὰς δὴ τινας γυναικας Ἀτροπάτης ἔδειξεν Ἀλέξανδρῳ, βαρβάρους τινὰς ἄλλας γυναικας ἵππεύειν ἡσκημένας δοκῶ ὅτι ἔδειξεν ἐξ τὸν λεγόμενον δὴ τῶν Αμαζόνων κόσμον ἐσταλμένας). Baynham goes a little further and suggests that “these women were ... intended for sexual gratification—prostitutes who had been taught to ride and who were playing out a contrived

<sup>55</sup> On this passage, Tarn 1948, II 329 comments: “It is, as Arrian suspected, a true story which has had an Amazonian λόγος tacked on to it; Atropates sent Alexander 100 armed girls on horseback, and Alexander sent them home again ‘lest they should be violated by the soldiery’.” There is, of course, the possibility that Atropates’ display of Amazon women is a later invention, aimed at debunking the famous story of Thalestris and Alexander, but if that were the case, why choose Atropates and Media as the story’s focus?

fantasy.” In that case, Alexander was probably more concerned about their corrupting influence on his army. But if they were prostitutes or actresses, they were probably part of the entertainment when Alexander put on games and shows in Ecbatana.<sup>56</sup> Nevertheless, I do not believe this “spectacle” was what *inspired* the Amazon episode. Rather, it is an indication that the story was already in circulation in one form or another.<sup>57</sup> Atropates had clearly brought the women for the sake of pageantry<sup>58</sup> (rather than with the intention of deceiving Alexander; cf. Arr. 7.13.6), and it is likely that this was deliberate parody. What lends particular support to this view is that Alexander is said to have dismissed the Amazons and told them to inform their queen that he would visit her in order to beget children by her, a tongue-in-cheek reversal of the Thalestris episode.<sup>59</sup> If the story of the king’s encounter with Thalestris originated in Alexander’s camp in Baktria-Sogdiana in 329–328, Atropates would have known about it (perhaps with Artabazos or some other Persian sufficiently fluent in Greek acting as a translator), since he had spent those very years in Alexander’s entourage. Only in winter of 328/7 was he sent from Nautaka to Media to replace Oxydates as satrap of the Medes.<sup>60</sup>

Events	Source(s)	Atropates’ “Amazons” (Arr. 7.13.2–3)
In Hyrcania	Justin 12.3.4–5; Diod. 17.77.1; cf. Curt. 6.4.17, 5.24	At Ecbatana
At the Iaxartes	Plut. <i>Alex.</i> 46.1	
The Amazon queen was named Thalestris	Justin 12.3.5; Curt. 6.5.25; Diod. 17.77.2 (Thallestris); Strabo 11.5.4	No queen is present

<sup>56</sup> Baynham 2001, 120–1. For games in Ecbatana see Arr. 7.14.1; Plut. *Alex.* 72.1; cf. Diod. 17.110.7. For Atropates entertaining Alexander in Ecbatana see also Athen. 13.538a (‘Satrabates’). I see no reason for suspecting that Atropates was trying to avoid punishment at the hands of Alexander. The so-called reign of terror (thus Badian 1961) was in fact the just punishment of officials guilty of malfeasance and other crimes, and Atropates did not fit into that category (see Heckel 2008, 135–6).

<sup>57</sup> Baynham 2001, 121 allows for the possibility that “tales of the king’s earlier alleged liaison with an Amazon queen were already in circulation,” though I suspect she means the story of a Dahan or Sakan warrior who met Alexander in Hyrcania. Because of Alexander’s dismissal of the women, Baynham argues that “Alexander’s reaction was the opposite of the satrap’s expectation.”

<sup>58</sup> Cf. the legend that, during the Second Crusade, Eleanor of Aquitaine and her female attendants dressed as Amazons (Runciman 1951–4, II 262 n. 1).

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Roisman 2017, 259–60.

<sup>60</sup> Arr. 4.18.3; cf. Curt. 8.3.17 (confused). For Atropates and Oxydates see Heckel 2021, nos. 261, 835; see also Hyland 2013; Obrycht 2023, 129.

Events	Source(s)	Atropates' "Amazons" (Arr. 7.13.2–3)
Sends a message asking for permission to come to Alexander, which the king grants	Curt. 6.5.25 only	Alexander tells the "Amazons" to inform their queen, when they return home, that he is willing to come to her in order to beget a child
Travels 6,000 stades from Themiscyra to Hyrcania	Strabo 11.5.4 C505 = Cleitarchus ( <i>FGrH</i> 137 F16); Justin 12.3.5 (she travels for 35 days)	
Arrives with 300 attendants	Justin 12.3.5; Diod. 17.77.1; Curt. 3.5.26	100 "Amazons" exhibited by Atropates
Leaps from her horse brandishing two lances	Curt. 6.5.26	
Her dress	Justin 12.3.6 (strange); Curt. 6.5.27 (a robe that did not cover her entire body, tied in a knot so it did not reach to the knee).	Dress like cavalrymen but armed with axes and small shields
Her breasts	Curtius 6.5.27 (left breast is exposed)	Some said the right breast was smaller and it was exposed, as it would have been in battle
Reference to the cauterized right breast of the Amazons	Curt. 6.5.28	No mention of cauterizaton
Thalestris is disappointed by Alexander's appearance	Curt. 6.5.29	Alexander is clearly thinks little of the fighting qualities of the "Amazons" and so he dismisses them
Her purpose is to have sex with Alexander;	Justin 12.3.6 (her purpose causes general surprise); Strabo 11.5.4 C505; Diod. 17.77.2; Curt. 6.5.30	Alexander sends the "Amazons" away lest they be sexually violated by the Macedonian or barbarian troops
She thought that the greatest of men and women should produce an heir	Diod. 17.77.3; Curt. 6.5.30	
Alexander asks her if she would like to serve in his campaign	Curt. 6.5.31	Atropates has brought the "Amazons" to serve with Alexander's forces
Thalestris enjoys sex more than Alexander did	Curt. 6.5.31	
Thirteen days spent in love-making	Justin 12.3.7; Curt. 6.4.31; Diod. 17.77.3	

Events	Source(s)	Atropates' "Amazons" (Arr. 7.13.2–3)
Thalestris satisfied she is pregnant	Justin 12.3.7	
She returns to her kingdom	Justin 12.3.7; Curt. 6.4.31; Diod. 17.77.3	Sent back to their kingdom by Alexander
Alexander gives her gifts before she leaves	Diod. 17.77.3	

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## Abstract

This article by Waldemar Heckel critically examines the famous episode of Alexander the Great's meeting with the Amazon queen Thalestris, a story recounted by some ancient historians but rejected by others. Heckel reviews the ancient sources – such as Justin, Plutarch, Diodorus, and Curtius – and evaluates their reliability, noting the division between those who treated the episode as historical (Kleitarchos, Polykleitos, Onesikritos) and those who omitted or repudiated it (Aristoboulos, Ptolemy, Chares, among others). The paper explores how the Alexander-Thalestris encounter drew on earlier mythological motifs, particularly Herakles' association with the Amazons, and how the episode may have served as both entertainment and flattery at Alexander's court, feeding into poetic and rhetorical traditions that likened Alexander to legendary heroes. Heckel discusses the historical plausibility of the event, referencing geographic confusions among the sources, and assesses hypotheses that the story originated from actual contacts with steppe warrior women. The article further contextualizes the Amazon narrative by comparing it to other stories from Alexander's campaign, including Atropates' presentation of so-called "Amazons" and related diplomatic episodes. Heckel ultimately suggests that the Thalestris story was a literary creation that emerged from the intellectual milieu of Alexander's entourage to enhance his legend and entertain his followers, rather than a reflection of a genuine historical encounter.