

Cultural Narratives

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The Parthenon's outer perimeter displays 92 marble metopes which represent the Greek heroes' fabled struggle with ferocious barbaric creatures: giants, Trojans, centaurs and Amazons, who inhabited the uncivilised world beyond Greek frontiers, where, according to Hellenic narrative, chaos reigned.

The Greeks understood the world in terms of mythology. In their account of the universe, female warriors from barbaric tribes constituted a model that represented a threat from the uncivilised world. They embodied both erotic attraction and a violent, dangerous opposing enemy, to be dominated and defeated, so as to be controlled.

The Parthenon's metopes and ancient texts about the Amazons exhibit these characteristics. The Greeks fought Amazon tribes during the Trojan War and the invasion of Athens. They therefore became part of their history and entered the collective mind by means of glorified battles against the Greek heroes. Theseus, Heracles and Achilles were therefore at the time often portrayed dominating Amazons.

This narrative is portrayed at the Parthenon as a myth and, frequently appearing in other places, it goes under the generic name of Amazonomachy.

I too have chosen the name Amazonomachy for this project, where I aim to reassess the relationship between the myth of the Amazons and their real existence.

Having used encrypted language, QR codes and Kufic Arabic as the core of various projects, I was working on something beyond linguistic structures that deals with content. My reasoning led me to intuit that in the same way that an encrypted language needs to be interpreted when read, cultural narratives can be approached in the same way. So my goal was to unravel underlying narratives hidden within certain cultural manifestations.

My first approach to the Parthenon Amazonomachy was during a visit to the Acropolis. I was struck by how the story seems so remarkably antagonistic to today's feminist discourse. Not only antagonistic, it appears to have clearly contributed to shaping chauvinism in our era, denying women certain roles and, by doing so, reserving those roles for men: the very core of the gender dilemma. With this in mind, I decided to find out about the subject in depth and to question the most common interpretations that I had unconsciously shared without ever having given them much thought.

It was then that I discovered that recent archaeological tests using forensic technologies, had reclassified many male warrior corpses, found in the plains of the Caucasus, as female warriors.

Tombs, which had up till now been catalogued as belonging to male warriors buried with their horses and weapons, were those of women, and prove the existence of a culture of which we

only have left the aforementioned remains and a few references by Herodotus, Plato and other Persian and Egyptian writers.

This fact helped me understand that, far from myth, the Amazons belonged to real tribes who had fought the Greeks. A literal reading of the Parthenon metopes can therefore be made and the real history of these warring peoples, which included women who fought as equals with and against men, can be acknowledged. Consequently, it might also be necessary to rescue an epic past for women, where their capacity to equal men in many fields will be restored. After all, if they were capable of fighting, how could they not be capable of undertaking many other functions on equal terms.

Perhaps the time has come to get used to the idea that classic Greek artistic representation really corresponds to epic stories of military victories. Far from being the mere idealisation of mythological tradition, they correspond to triumphs over other peoples, military dominance that wiped out a culture where women were prevalent, comparable to men in many areas.

Male preponderance in classical Greece gave rise to the biased reading of historical memory. To exalt a victorious hero usually goes hand in hand with despising a defeated enemy. A chauvinist interpretation of this development corresponds well with the traditional interpretations we have inherited regarding battles between Greeks and Amazons: turning these women into mythological figures is an efficient way of denying them their historical role, denying even the possibility of them having held such a role in Greek civilisation. Depriving the Amazons of an epic past is a means of oppression, both in terms of gender and political and cultural rivalry.

In the summer of 2017, I photographed the 14 metopes on the west face of the Parthenon, at Athens's new Acropolis Museum. Lacking a tripod, often forbidden in museums, it was important to have a stable prop, so my partner's shoulder was a perfect support for the photos to be sharp. The project that I call Amazonomaquia 1.1 started with that series. I wasn't aware at the time, that this visual approach could lead to a subject I thought as attractive as it was complex.

I began testing it with a couple of metopes. I then selected the best preserved and produced original size photos and pondered ways to add the message I wanted to convey about them. After many trials I fine-tuned my intervention in the reproductions. By superimposing a graphite, hand drawn grid over the photos, I had a structure which could be used as a visual aid on which to write.

The first tests produced a satisfactory result. However, the photo quality had to be improved and the best paper found, which could reproduce the image of a very damaged artwork and tolerate an intervention with modern text. When I was satisfied with the results, I decided to undertake the production of the 14 metopes. I drew a text onto each, which I thought sufficiently communicated what I began to call "an exercise in historical reclassification". The texts are not written directly on the paper, they're on a sheet of perspex fixed five centimetres above it. As the written text casts a shadow onto the images, a whole new interesting

dimension opened up. It started acquiring the mysterious, vibrant traits that I had pursued. It was like giving the Amazons back the voice that had been imprisoned when others' stories stole their soul and meaning.

The texts I added to the metopes are the following:

- Reclassified.
- The reality of combat.
- Warrior Women.
- The loss of the language and culture of the defeated.
- It's not myth, it's history.

These five statements resulted from reading up and reflecting on the subject. The last book I read, Adrienne Mayor's recently published *The Amazons: Lives and Legends of Warrior Women across the Ancient World*, was especially helpful.

I then decided to write the texts in a language analogous to the visual style of the metopes. I decided they had to be written in classical Greek. Not having the linguistic know-how, this posed a new challenge. It did seem, however, that it would provide a valid dialogue with such powerful, beautiful images. As a culmination of the process, I decided to give the calligraphy another visual twist.

We have no vestiges of the Amazon tribes' language. We don't know what they spoke, although it is known that Greek and Persian were used in the Caucasus Plains, so I opted to create a corresponding calligraphy. Having worked with different scripts, the Mexican chancery bastard, Arabic Kufic and QR codes, I liked the idea of generating a new type of calligraphy for these works.

Creating the font was one of the most interesting aspects of the project. I planned a hybrid font and set out to design an Eastern version of classical Greek. Firstly I had to find a kind translator who would convert my texts from Spanish to Greek. Fortunately, there are people willing to do favours even for the most abstruse projects. Once the texts were translated, I converted each character into dots, that is, I pixelated them, as if they were particles in the cosmos. I subsequently drew up a chart of the imagined script's new alphabet. The result was a drawing containing what were to be the letters of a unique language. The drawing is included in this catalog (pp. 4-5).

I inscribed my five statements in fourteen drawings using the new alphabet, one for each metope. I draft-ed them onto perspex with black and blue felt-tips, as these were the colours of the tattoos found on the warriors whose graves had been analysed.

Once I'd finished the series of fourteen metopes, I realised that some of the scenes represented were so damaged it was impossible to see anything other than a set of abstract blurs. Though aesthetically attractive, one could not appreciate the relationship with the Amazonomachy's

original narrative. This led me to consider making a new series of works where I would replace the text in *Amazonomaquia 1.1* with images that would evoke the metope's original appearance. This is how the second series that I call *Amazonomaquia 1.2* was born.

Amazonomaquia 1.2

The Parthenon pieces' state of deterioration is so bad that metopes 7 and 8 are just rough patches and number 6 is missing. Nevertheless, I could study the iconography of these stories, common in their day, in other better preserved examples of Amazonomachy. Using the Parthenon remains, the Halicarnaso mausoleum frieze (British Museum), pieces at the Piraeus Archaeological Museum in Athens and various Greek vases, I was able to get an idea of typical Amazonomachy. I chose some of them to elaborate my second series of metopes.

While exploring the project's visual possibilities, I decided to print the metopes onto wood. I did quite a few tests. Many of the originals had insufficient contrast, making it difficult to preserve the metope's scant visual information and to prevent it from disappearing into the grain of the wood that I had chosen.

Each metope photo is printed on a 32 x 32 centimetre Elm wood panel. When placed side by side, the reduced scale permits a reading of the Amazonomachy as an ongoing action, as if it were a cartoon strip, with each metope showing a vigorous battle scene like in a film frame. I drew black silhouettes of fighting Amazons on perspex. I put these drawings over the metopes, in the same way as with the *Amazonomaquia 1.1*'s texts.

Amazonomaquia 1.3

Having finished the two metope series, and although satisfied, I still felt the need to take the project further to do justice to the project's origin. Everything had started with my surprise on realising the anti-feminist sense attributed to the Amazonomachy. After researching the ins and outs of historical interpretation of classical mythology and to do justice to my initial motivation, I wanted to finalise by reconciling Amazonomachy with the present.

I read Heinrich von Kleist's *Penthesilea* (dated 1808). To tell his story of the Amazons' battle with the Greeks and being a young passionate author, he based his work on the classical Amazon myth.

What I like most is how Von Kleist differs from classic versions where, according to Virgil and Pliny the Elder, Achilles kills *Penthesilea* the Amazon queen. In a really daring transgression, he inverts the scene and makes it she who kills Achilles. This won him the disapproval of his peers, starting with Goethe.

Being keen to conclude the project with all this in mind, I came across a female athlete who was advertising the new Nike hijab for Muslim sportswomen.

Watching the ad gave me the solution I was looking for to complete my work. Von Kleist's text is in a way a claim for Amazonian feminism, in the sense of military victory. I then realised another aspect of his claim: battling women endure. Endurance is reflected in these young female athletes, who go places and assume roles traditionally reserved for men.

So I got going. I wanted to make a video about what I called "The New Amazons". Young female athletes who do combat sports. So I featured together in my video Arifa Bseiso (1984, Jordan), Farinaz Lari Khanjari (1987, Iran) and Joana Pastrana (1991, Spain). Arifa is Jordan's national team captain, lightweight champion and appears in Nike's recent campaign to promote women's sport in the Middle East. Farinaz is the first Iranian woman to win the Lightweight Kickboxing World Championship and Joana was recently proclaimed (on October 5, 2018) Lightweight Boxing World Champion, in Madrid. Three top level contemporary sportswomen.

My video shows the fighters training and in action, while you hear voices reading Von Kleist's culminating excerpt where Penthesilea and her dogs maul Achilles to death. Another way to reverse the mythical-erotic content of traditional stories.

With my three Amazonomachy I believe I have provided an artistic approach to a question that has multiple possible interpretations, nowadays also including gender as an angle of inquiry. I'm happy with the result. It is a way to approach classical art which is often difficult to connect to the present day, yet so valuable artistically and culturally speaking. I hope my contribution helps rouse interest in approaching the amazing artworks that have marked us in many more ways than we tend to think.