

Etruscan Shieldmaidens: Evidence for Warrior Women in Archaic Italy

Hos super advenit Volsca de gente Camilla agmen agens equitum et florentis aere catervas, bellatrix, non illa colo calathisque Minervae femineas adsueta manus, sed proelia virgo dura pati cursuque pedum praevertere ventos, (Aeneid, 7.803-807, “Over the army comes the warrior Camilla of the Volscians, leading horsemen and troops with glittering bronze, her womanly hands were not familiar with Minerva’s spindle and basket, but a strong virgin having come to endure battle, the course of her feet outruns the wind”). In Greek and Roman mythology, Amazons are the most recognizable warrior women. However, Virgil is not describing an Amazon, but an elite, heroic Italian female warrior.

Amazons are easily recognizable in Greek art. On Attic vases they often fight and are defeated by Herakles, Theseus or Achilles. Inscriptions with famous names like Penthesilea, Hippolyte, or Atalanta are also a sure way to identify female warriors as Amazons. Scythian style clothing also identifies warrior women as Amazons. In Etruscan art, however, there is evidence to show that women who have been traditionally identified as Amazons may be something else entirely. Architectural sculpture groups in Pyrgi, Caere, Veii, Satricum, and Capua (7th – 6th centuries BCE) have mounted warrior women with dark skin and are often riding side saddle (Record Numbers 1631, 1715, Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum). This is particularly striking because women throughout Greek and Etruscan art are depicted with white skin. Darker skin suggests a special elite status for these women. Sarcophagi from Tarquinia and Vulci (4th century BCE) have paintings and sculptures of warrior women wearing long chitons (Haynes, 2000), fighting nude (Brendel, 1978), and conquering their male opponents in battle (Haynes, 2000). A *skyphos* from the Barberini tomb shows a nude, mounted female warrior amongst wildlife (Brendel, 1978). Aucena’s *cista* shows the Judgement of Paris with two mounted women named Casenter and Oinumama (Wiseman, 2004) - exclusively Etruscan characters.

Although one might conclude, with Brendel (1978) and Haynes (2000); that these are simply Etruscan versions of Amazons, there is evidence to show these are warrior women unique to Etruscan culture.

Numerous rich female tombs in archaic Etruscan and Latin cities have chariots that were only associated with warriors and kings (Bartolini and Grottanelli, 1989). Like Virgil's Camilla, who was unfamiliar with spindles, these women did not have spindles either, but rather wall shields. In the Regolini-Galassi tomb, a woman was buried wearing an elaborate golden breastplate (Haynes, 2000). A woman buried with a spear in Tarquinia was mistakenly identified as a "warrior prince," then later revealed to be a "warrior princess" after a more detailed bone analysis (Lorenzi, 2013).

After Virgil describes Camilla's companions, he calls them "*Italides, quas ipsa decus sibi dia Camilla delegit pacisque bonas bellique ministras,*" (Aen. 11.657, "daughters of Italy, who god-like Camilla herself chose to be her glory, her good handmaidens in peace and in war"). Again, we see that they are Italian born, not Amazons. We also see that Camilla is elite, being described as god-like, and the fact that she has handmaidens.

At the very least, we know there was an elite class of women unique to Etruscan and Archaic Latin culture. While we cannot know to what extent women were involved in Etruscan warrior culture without a bone analysis of the chariot tombs, there is enough evidence to question whether or not war was exclusively a male affair and to consider what kind of presence they had on the battlefield.

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