

WAR AND WOMEN: AN ANALYSIS OF ATHENA'S MARTIAL ROLE IN
GREEK MYTHOLOGY

Anjali Ramachandran

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Dr. Todd Curtis
Department of Classics
Supervising Professor

Dr. Carol MacKay
Department of English
Second Reader

ABSTRACT

Author: Anjali Ramachandran, B.A. Plan II Honors and B.S.A Biochemistry

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Supervisor: Dr. Todd Curtis

Second Reader: Dr. Carol MacKay

This thesis explores the mythical and sociocultural justification for the worship of war goddesses by patriarchal societies, using the Greek goddess of war, Athena, as the main point of analysis. The analysis will consist of a broad overview of Athena's association with warfare, as seen in ancient Greek poetry, prose, and histories. Athena's major function in myth is to strengthen and support the Greek state and its institutions. This idea is reflected heavily in how she chooses to use her warlike character to ultimately protect Greek society and its traditions.

For contextualization, this thesis also includes chapters on mortal women in Greek myth who participate in warfare and the actual historical roles for Greek women during the Archaic and Classical Ages. The chapter on mortal warlike women opens a discussion on mortal and immortal femininity, and how immortality allows goddesses more freedom to transgress into male-dominated realms of activity. The chapter on historical Greek women provides sociocultural information that is used to draw connections between female roles in society and Athena's role in myth.

To further broaden the scope of this work, a final chapter on war goddesses in other mythologies is included. This overview contextualizes Athena's characterization with that of war goddesses in other mythologies, including Freyja and the Valkyries in Norse myth, Sekhmet and Bastet in Egyptian myth, and Durga in Hindu myth. These goddesses were included to find overarching similarities and differences between depictions of war and women in myth across different cultures.

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Introduction

Athena, the Greek goddess of war, is a prominent figure in classical Greek mythology. Though female, Athena was represented as the epitome of Greek national and martial identity, despite the inherently patriarchal structure of Greek society. Greek women functioned primarily in the domestic sphere and were unable to participate in many of the realms Athena represented, the most notable being warfare. This paradoxical representation of war is present in some other world mythologies, as many feature martial goddesses. This thesis will explore the mythical and sociocultural justifications for depicting these female figures in myth with warlike attributes.

Understandably, this question is difficult to answer, as the values of ancient societies are often obscure due to limited surviving documentation. Consequently, there are different theories as to why ancient patriarchal societies would worship female war deities. In general, the relationship between mortal and immortal femininity is considered when analyzing ancient myth. It is important to note that divinity lends women a certain freedom that mortality restricts. Immortality distances women from worldly constraints, and so can potentially allow them to be transgressive.¹ Many scholars have pointed to this as potential reasoning for female deities to represent predominately male activities, such as warfare.²

Another interesting theory points to the symbolic significance of associating women with life and motherhood. In antiquity, women were defined by their relationship to motherhood and childbearing. By extension, women were often also associated with death, as evidenced in Greek culture by their ritual role in funerary rites. This connection can also be extended to mythology.

¹ In this thesis, the term “transgressive” is used in reference to women who have crossed into male-dominated areas of activity, such as warfare.

² See Susan Deacy, “Athena and the Amazons: Mortal and Immortal Femininity in Greek Myth,” in *What is a God?: Studies in the Nature of Greek Divinity*, ed. Alan B. Lloyd (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 1997), 153-168; and Sue Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece* (London: British Museum Press, 1995), 13-62.

The themes of life and death are often paired together, often in the form of fertility and destruction. Scholars have pointed to this duality as a repeated theme in many mythologies.³ This idea provides a potential justification for the existence of female war deities, in that their association to death and warfare can be rationalized by an association with fertility or motherhood.

For Athena specifically, there are a variety of theories as to why she is depicted with warlike attributes. Some literature claims that Athena is a warrior who constantly aligns herself with male society, and so is justified in her martial ability.⁴ For instance, Athena is daughter to Zeus, the king of the Greek gods. Some scholars claim that Athena's connection to Zeus justifies her power, as her authority can ultimately be traced back to him.⁵ There are others who argue that granting male characteristics to a female deity actually functions to bring women *further* under male control. In her book, *Women in Ancient Greece*, Sue Blundell states:

As females, [Athena and Artemis] would naturally be seen as sharing in the nature of women; but as females who repudiate the most characteristic of women's functions (marriage and childbirth) and engage instead in the most characteristic of masculine activities (fighting and hunting), they would also be regarded as honorary males. By combining the female and the male principles in this way, they would be able to bring women's creativity within the orbit of men's control.⁶

In addition, there is yet another school of thought that examines the relationship between Athena's virginity and her warlike ability. Athena is often depicted using her warlike ability to

³ See Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece*, 73; and Robert Luyster, "Symbolic Elements in the Cult of Athena." *History of Religions* 5, no. 1 (Summer, 1965): 133-163.

⁴ See Susan Deacy, "Athena and the Amazons," 157.

⁵ See Jenifer Neils, "Athena, Alter Ego of Zeus," in *Athena in the Classical World*, ed. Susan Deacy and Alexandra Villing (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2001), 219-232.

⁶ Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece*, 44.

act as the guardian of Greek cities. Some scholars argue that Athena guards the city as she does her virginity, and that to conquer the city is akin to sexual violation of its guardian goddess.⁷ As the scholar Walter Burkert says, “a goddess of citadel and city she manifests herself in the evocative image of the armed maiden, valiant and untouchable: to conquer a city is to loosen her veils.”⁸

Consequently, the sociocultural justification for warlike women in myth is a complex question, with many possible interpretations. This thesis uses the perspectives of scholars who are interested in analyzing classics through the lens of gender, as this work focuses on how gender intersects with war in mythology. Of particular interest is the conversation about transgressive femininity, which analyzes how female figures in myth cross into and operate in predominantly male spheres of activity, such as warfare. In addition, the historical background of Greek society was included to further contextualize the analysis, as Athena’s depiction in myth is likely connected to contemporaneous values.

This thesis begins with a discussion on the function of Athena’s warlike role, and how that intersects with her gender. Chapter 1 examines Athena’s various roles and titles in myth to show that her warrior character is primarily used to protect and preserve the Greek state and its values. Throughout her major myths, Athena’s warlike character is examined to provide the basis for the argument of this thesis. Next, Chapter 2 discusses the mortal women in Greek myth who are associated with warfare. This chapter introduces a discussion on mortal and immortal femininity, in which immortal goddesses are free to be transgressive in the ways that mortal

⁷ See Susan Deacy, “Athena and Ares: War, Violence and Warlike Deities,” in *War and Violence in Ancient Greece*, ed. Hans van Wees (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 2000), 293.

⁸ Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion: Archaic and Classical* (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 1985), 140.

women are not. This idea allows further freedom for divine women to practice warfare and other predominantly masculine activities. Chapter 3 contextualizes the mythological analysis with the historical background of Greek women in the Archaic and Classical periods. In particular, the domestic and ritual roles of women provide some important sociocultural information about their purpose in society. This purpose is then reflected in the characterization of Athena, as there are similarities in the duties of Greek women and in Athena's role in the mythological canon. Finally, Chapter 4 includes a brief discussion of various war goddesses in other mythologies. Specifically, there are sections on Freyja and the Valkyries in Norse myth, Sekhmet and Bastet in Egyptian myth, and Durga in Hindu myth. Though there are major differences between Athena's characterization and that of these other war goddesses, it is useful to further contextualize this thesis' analysis and broaden its scope by referencing the mythological roles of other war goddesses in different cultures.

To answer the research question, this thesis explores the different ways that war intersects with gender in ancient mythologies. In general, despite their inherently transgressive characters, war goddesses never overtly challenge the gendered norms of the societies that worshipped them. Their association with warfare is often used to *protect* tradition, rather than challenge it. Athena's martial character is used to ensure the stability and prosperity of the Greek state and its traditional institutions. Women in ancient Greece shared a similar role, as they were charged with maintaining tradition and the accepted societal structure. A parallel can then be drawn between the roles of Athena and Greek women. Even though their methods differ, as Athena utilizes warfare and Greek women use their domestic skills, their purposes are ultimately the same: to preserve society by maintaining tradition. On the other hand, war goddesses in other

mythologies have slightly different characterizations. Most of the other goddesses analyzed in this thesis are associated with fertility or motherhood, as well as with warfare. As mentioned previously, perhaps the justification for their warlike characterization arises from their concurrent association with the feminine role of motherhood. In any case, Athena stands as a notable outlier to this life and death model, as her virginity and distance from motherhood is actually quite emphasized in her myths.

For this inquiry, primary texts, such as ancient Greek poetry, prose and histories, were the focus of analysis. Close reading and analysis of this literature provided information about the mythological representation of Athena, which in turn provided a basis for this thesis' argument. However, the primary texts used for research were all translated works, which is a potential limitation of this form of analysis as translations are typically heavily influenced by the translator, and as result, are not entirely impartial interpretations of the source material. The variability of surviving myths is another limitation for this form of analysis. Due to regional influences of the Greek city-states, Athena's myths often vary based on the identity and characteristics of that region. In addition, the collection of myths analyzed in this thesis are from a variety of time periods, and were thus exposed to different historical and societal influences. This thesis is more interested in Athena's characterization in all of her myths, rather than in any specific time or region, and therefore used this broad range of primary sources.

This thesis will contribute to the ongoing dialogue of analyzing classical myth through gender, in order to consider its broader implications for the values of gendered societies in antiquity. Ancient societies restricted warfare to men, and yet, worshipped war as a goddess. The

sociocultural relationship between women and warfare in mythology might offer answers to this paradox, and provide a more nuanced view on societal expectations for women in antiquity.

Chapter 1: Athena's Warlike Role

Athena is the Greek goddess of warfare, wisdom, craftsmanship, and heroic endeavor. Though her various spheres of influence seem disparate, Athena uses all of them toward a common goal: to protect the Greek state and its values. As the scholar Leonhard Schmitz writes in *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology*:

[Athena] seems to have been a divinity of a purely ethical character, and not the representative of any particular physical power manifested in nature; her power and wisdom appear in her being the protectress and preserver of the state and of social institutions. Everything, therefore, which gives to the state strength and prosperity, such as agriculture, inventions, and industry, as well as everything which preserves and protects it from injurious influence from without, such as the defence of the walls, fortresses, and harbours, is under her immediate care.⁹

Though her worship and role in myth dealt with many of these spheres of activity, this chapter will focus primarily on her warlike character and how it intersects with her other spheres of influence to protect the Greek state and its values. Athena is often depicted armed for battle, wielding a spear, shield, and a helmet. She wears the *aegis*, a cape of goatskin that bears the Gorgon's head, which is considered a symbol of war.¹⁰ Athena's warlike depiction is prominently featured in her mythological presence.¹¹ This chapter will discuss how Athena's

⁹ William Smith, *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology* (London: J. Murray, 1876), 398.

¹⁰ In myth, the *aegis* is typically represented as the skin of a monster that Athena killed and skinned, and subsequently wore about her shoulders.

¹¹ Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 139-143; Richard Buxton, *The Complete World of Greek Mythology* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2004), 79-80.

warlike character is manifested in her protective roles over Greek cities and heroes, and how she ultimately uses her power to uphold and strengthen the Greek state and its values.

Protector of the Polis

The names of Greek deities were often paired with epithets to highlight a specific part of their character. These epithets referenced either their local worship or their more universal character. For instance, Athena is often referred to as Athena Ergane (or worker) in many regions that emphasize the craftsmanship and industrious aspect of her divinity.¹² Among all of her epithets, there are quite a few that specifically refer her as a protector or a defender, which reinforces the relative importance of these attributes to her character.¹³ Of particular interest are the epithets that directly reference her roles as the protector of the city: Athena Polias and Athena Poliouchos.¹⁴ The importance of her protective role, especially as it pertains to the preservation of the city center, will be the focus of this section.

Greek city-states were often organized around a central city, called the *polis*, with surrounding countryside for farming.¹⁵ In cities, such as Athens, Argos, and Sparta, Athena's temples were built on a central fortified hill.¹⁶ The most recognizable example is the Parthenon on the Acropolis in Athens. Within this temple, there was a statue of Athena, armed and valiant,

¹² "Athena Titles & Epithets – Ancient Greek Religion," Theoi Greek Mythology, accessed April 25, 2020, <https://www.theoi.com/Cult/AthenaTitles.html>.

¹³ These epithets include Ageleia (leader or protectress of the people), Agoraea (protector of assemblies of people in the agora), Alacomene'is (powerful defender), and Promachorma (protectress of the bay). See Theoi Greek Mythology, "Athena Titles & Epithets".

¹⁴ Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece*, 26-29; Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 140.

¹⁵ Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece*, 63.

¹⁶ Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 140.

as a representation of the city's impregnability.¹⁷ The positioning of her temple suggests Athena's relative importance to the defense of the city-center, as she looks over the city as a general would oversee an army.

Her role as the protector of the *polis* can also be seen in Greek myths and literature, including those associated with the Trojan Cycle. The Trojan Cycle is a collection of epic poetry, including *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, that depicts the events and aftermath of the Trojan War, which was fought between the Greeks and the Trojans. *The Iliad* is attributed to the poet Homer and was written in the 8th century BCE to chronicle the events leading up to the fall of Troy.¹⁸ In the epic, the Trojans are depicted as culturally Greek. They worship the same gods and speak the same language. Other art and literature of this time period (the Archaic age) also depicted the Trojans in a similar manner.¹⁹ However, there is evidence to suggest that the actual historical city of Troy was culturally more Anatolian than Greek.²⁰ In addition, recently discovered documentation suggests that Troy was an ally of the Hittites, who were enemies of the mainland Greeks.²¹ The city of Troy was strategically positioned, as it was located at the entrance to the Dardanelles, which was an important waterway that linked the Aegean and Black Seas. It was also located right on the border between the Hittite and the Greek empires. As a result, Troy

¹⁷ Mark P.O. Morford and Robert J. Lenardon, *Classical Mythology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 169.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 396.

¹⁹ After the events of the Persian War in 5th century BCE, Troy was depicted as foreign and decidedly non-Greek, as a result of the Persian invasion of the Greek mainland. See Buxton, *The Complete World of Greek Mythology*, 200-201.

²⁰ Troy's urban layout resembles an Anatolian city more than a Greek city. Its architecture, pottery, and religious practices are also indicative of Anatolian culture. See Barry Strauss, *The Trojan War: A New History* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006), 2-3.

²¹ Troy made a military alliance with the Hittites to protect themselves against the threat of Greek invasion. In return, Troy became a Hittite vassal state. See Strauss, *The Trojan War*, 18; and Buxton, *The Complete World of Greek Mythology*, 202.

became a contentious site that sparked the interest of the mainland Greeks, both for its ideal location and for its alliance with the enemy Hittites.²² Though *The Iliad* depicts the Trojans as culturally Greek, this evidence suggests that there was perhaps a historical foundation for animosity between the two peoples, which could possibly be reflected in the epic.

In any case, the events and main conflict of the epic have a purely mythological basis. Before the events of the epic, Paris, the prince of Troy, was asked to judge between the goddesses Athena, Aphrodite, and Hera based on their beauty. Each goddess offered him a bribe: Hera offered power, Athena offered victory in war, and Aphrodite offered the world's most beautiful woman in the form of Helen, the queen of Sparta.²³ Paris "first committed that act of blind folly at the judgement in his shepherd's hut, when he humiliated Hera and Athene by preferring Aphrodite" (*Il.* 24.27-29).²⁴ Despite being married to Menelaos, the king of Sparta, Helen left with Paris as a reward for his choice. By choosing Aphrodite over Athena (and Hera), Paris arguably doomed his city to destruction. Greek society heavily valued the family unit, known as the *oikos*. The *oikos* was considered the main social unit of the *polis*, and formed the foundation of a stable and civilized society. Breaking the sanctity of this family unit was akin to endangering the *polis* at large.²⁵ By undermining the *oikos*, Paris violated a core tenet of Greek society, which by extension, characterized the Trojans as displaying less than ideal Greek values. Moreover, Paris also indirectly undermined one of Athena's most important roles as the protector of the *polis* by violating the *oikos*, as the stability of one depends on that of the other. This event

²² Strauss, *The Trojan War*, 8.

²³ Buxton, *The Complete World of Greek Mythology*, 132.

²⁴ Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. E. V. Rieu (London: Penguin Group, 1950), 421.

²⁵ See Chapter 3 for a more detailed discussion on the importance of the *oikos* to the *polis*.

sets Athena against the Trojans from the start, and consequently, she bestows her patronage to heroes on the Greek side of the war.

Notably, Troy in *The Iliad* has a central temple to Athena, which was meant to protect and preserve the city as it was besieged. Though Athena fought against them, Troy still invokes the goddess for protection. During the siege of Troy, Hector bids his mother to “go with offerings to the temple of the war-leader Athene” to pray for protection against invasion (*Il.* 6.271).²⁶ Hector’s mother, along with a few other women, goes to the altar of Athena and invokes the goddess:

Lady Athene, protectress of cities, celestial goddess, ... we will sacrifice here and now in your shrine a dozen year-old heifers that have never worked, if only you will have pity on the town. (*Il.* 6.306-310)²⁷

It is worth noting that Athena is invoked first with a reference to her role as “protectress of cities,” thereby emphasizing the importance of this part of her divinity in her worship. However, the fall of Troy is heavily foreshadowed a few lines later, as in answer to the prayer, “Pallas Athene shook her head” and refused to bestow her protection upon the city (*Il.* 6.312).²⁸

Furthermore, Athena’s role as protector of the *polis* is so potent that Troy itself cannot fall until the Palladium of Athena is taken from the city, thereby removing the last vestige of Athena’s presence. Once the Palladium is removed, the city of Troy no longer has Athena’s protection,

²⁶ Homer, *The Iliad*, 106.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 107.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 107.

and therefore falls to the invading Greek forces.²⁹ These events in *The Iliad* show how Athena uses her divine ability to bestow protection upon the cities worthy of her favor. As soon as a city proves unworthy of her protection, as Troy did with its prince's dishonorable act, Athena withdraws her favor and campaigns for its eventual destruction.

Athena's role as the protector of cities is also referenced in the Homeric Hymns. The Hymns were written between the 7th and 5th centuries BCE and are attributed to the poet Homer. The Hymns were thought to be preludes to longer poems and often invoke specific deities.³⁰ In the Homeric Hymns 11 and 28 to Athena, she is invoked with the descriptor "savior of cities." In particular, Homeric Hymn 11 focuses on her association with warfare and protection of the citadel:

Of Pallas Athena, the savior of cities, I begin to sing, dread goddess, who with Ares takes care of the works of war and of sacked cities and of the war cry and of battles. It is she who protects the army as it goes and returns from the fight. Hail, Goddess, and give to us happiness and good fortune.³¹

It is again worth noting that Athena is described as "the savior of cities" first, highlighting the relative importance of this particular role. The Hymn then goes on to mention Athena's association with successful sieges and fallen citadels, as cities protected by Athena can fall only when she withdraws her favor, as evidenced by her relationship with Troy in *The Iliad*. Athena is presented in a dual role, as she is referenced to as both an attacker and defender in the Homeric

²⁹ Proclus, *The Sack of Ilium*, trans. Stephen M. Trzaskoma (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2004), 381.

³⁰ Homer, *The Homeric Hymns*, trans. Stephen M. Trzaskoma (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2004), 168.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 204-205

Hymn. Although the Hymn highlights her warlike nature to emphasize the importance of the destructive aspect of her character, it also ends with a plea for her to bless them with good fortune. This shows how Athena is capable of using that destructive ability to bless those who deserve her favor.

In short, the material and literary evidence of Athena's mythological depiction shows how she uses her warlike abilities to bestow protection on the cities she deems worthy; namely, the cities that best exhibit Greek ideals, as exemplified by the events in *The Iliad*. Though there is evidence of a potential historical basis for the Trojan War, it is arguably more useful to consider the epic in its mythological context to analyze Athena's warlike role. Both the Greeks and Trojans are culturally similar in the epic and hold the same values, but the Trojans commit an act that violates the integrity of the family unit. This act, along with a direct slight against her, results in Athena withdrawing her protection from the city and campaigning for its destruction. The Greeks retain their honor and their values by declaring war on the offending people. Consequently, Athena gives them her martial protection, which the Trojans prove themselves unworthy of with the judgement of Paris.

Protector of Heroes

Athena's protective role also extends further, to individuals as well as to cities. She acts as both a guide to and a protector of many Greek heroes as they continue on their journeys. Athena chooses individuals who embody the desirable values of Greek society to be worthy of her favor and protection. Most notably, Athena's relationships with Achilles and Odysseus in

The Iliad highlight how she uses her martial nature to support these heroes, and ultimately, how this upholds the values of broader Greek society.

To reiterate, in the context of *The Iliad*, both sides of the conflict are depicted as culturally Greek. However, the events that trigger the Trojan War show how Athena chooses to align herself and her power with the Greek side rather than with the Trojans. As discussed in the previous section, Paris stole Helen away from her husband, thereby violating the integrity of their family unit. The *oikos* was the social unit of the Greek city-state, and it was important to maintain its integrity. By taking Helen away from her family, the Trojan prince undermined the accepted rules of conduct in Greek society. In addition to this, he also directly slighted Athena by choosing another goddess over her. Consequently, Athena aligns herself with the Greek heroes, who did not overtly disregard Greek societal conventions as the Trojans did.

In the epic, Athena chooses to assist Achilles and Odysseus, who were heroes on the Greek side of the conflict. Achilles was the greatest of all Greek warriors. His mother was the divine sea-nymph Thetis and his father Peleus was mortal.³² Achilles embodied the warrior ideal, and his skills were highly sought after when the Greeks set out to fight against the Trojans. Odysseus was the king of Ithaca and was known for his crafty intelligence. Initially reluctant to join the Greek coalition, Odysseus feigned madness and pretended to sow the earth with salt instead of seed. His deception was eventually discovered and he was compelled to join the war effort.³³ Both of these heroes embodied the Greek ideals of skill in warfare and intelligence,

³² Buxton, *The Complete World of Greek Mythology*, 94, 133.

³³ *Ibid.*, 133

represented by Achilles and Odysseus, respectively. By supporting them in their endeavors, Athena reinforced the relative importance of these characteristics to the people of Greek society.

Throughout the war, Athena directly aligns herself and her martial power with Achilles. During one of the battle scenes, Athena even goes so far as to allow Achilles to channel her own power by giving him her *aegis*, which is an explicit symbol of her martial ability:

Athene threw her fringed aegis round [Achilles'] mighty shoulders and the celestial goddess also crowned him with a golden cloud around his head, and from it a blaze of light shone out. (*Il.* 18.203-206)³⁴

As mentioned previously, Athena's *aegis* is one of the direct manifestations of her martial power. By giving it to Achilles, Athena literally gives him her military blessing to help him during the battle. In addition, when "[Achilles] stood and gave a shout, ... in the distance Pallas Athene raised the war-cry too" (*Il.* 18.217-218).³⁵ Athena repeatedly aligns herself and her power with Achilles as he fights against the Trojans. In doing so, Athena chooses to use to her combative ability to support a Greek hero on the battlefield. This choice ultimately reflects her tendency to use her warlike character in a markedly supportive role for Greek heroes, in order to orchestrate their eventual victory over the Trojans.

Furthermore, Athena bestows her martial blessing to guide the weapons of various Greek heroes, most notably Achilles and Diomedes. In one scene, Achilles himself claims that "Pallas Athene is waiting to bring [Hector] down with [his] spear" (*Il.* 22.271-272).³⁶ This emphasizes the importance of Athena's presence on the battlefield, as Achilles directly calls on it to support

³⁴ Homer, *The Iliad*, 325.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 325.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 387.

his claim to victory against Hector, the Trojan prince. In the case of Diomedes, Athena assists him by guiding his spear when he attacks Ares, the Greek god of war. As “Diomedes, master of the battle-cry, then attacked [Ares] with his bronze spear and Pallas Athene drove it home into the lower part of Ares’ belly” (*Il.* 5.856-857).³⁷ This is another example of Athena directly intervening and lending her martial ability to benefit a Greek hero of myth. These excerpts show how Athena chooses to align herself on the battlefield, as she supports exemplary heroes who fight on the side of the Greeks.

Athena assists yet another Greek hero, Odysseus, in *The Iliad*. After the death of Patroclus, Odysseus participates in a foot race with Ajax. As he is competing, Odysseus directly invokes Athena and asks for her blessing by saying “Hear me, goddess, be kind and help me. Come and speed my feet” (*Il.* 23.770-771).³⁸ After Odysseus wins the foot race, his opponent claims “it was the goddess tripped [him] up – the one who always dances attendance on Odysseus, like a mother” (*Il.* 23.782-783).³⁹ This claim draws further attention to Athena’s connection with Greek heroes and her willingness to lend her blessing and godlike ability to assist them in their tasks. As mentioned earlier, Athena was heavily associated with wisdom, as well as with warfare. Since Odysseus was known for his intelligence and crafty nature, it is no surprise that Athena favored him. These events provide further evidence for Athena’s role in guiding Greek heroes, using both her wisdom and her skill in warfare.

These mythological examples in *The Iliad* show Athena’s willingness to use her warlike character to support exceptional Greek heroes that represent the ideal Greek values, such as

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 97.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 416.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 416.

intelligence and skill in warfare. Though there are notable examples of Trojan warriors possessing the same skills, it is evident that Athena's choice to support the Greeks is well-supported by the events that triggered the war. The Trojans may display Greek ideals, but the mainland Greeks seem to display a *better* version of the same ideals, both by not committing Paris' folly and by exhibiting prowess on the battlefield. In a broader sense, Athena's support of the Greek heroes ultimately reflects how she uses her martial ability to protect and preserve the Greek state, in the form of its exemplary people.

Birth of Athena

Athena's birth in Greek myth illustrates how her protective role extends to preserving and upholding tradition and the civilized order of the world. Her birth myth also provides further justification of her powerful warlike nature, though she is female and war is a typically masculine pursuit.

The Greek cosmogony myth is depicted in Hesoid's poem *Theogony*, written in the 8th or 7th century BCE. The poem provides speculation about the origin of the universe and the birth of the gods. Of particular interest is the bloody line of divine successions for power, where the godly son returns to overthrow the father and take the throne. This pattern is seen with the defeat of Ouranos by his son Kronos, and then the subsequent defeat of Kronos by his son Zeus. It was foretold that another son would arrive and overthrow Zeus in turn, so in order to prevent this, Zeus swallowed the goddess Metis who carried his child.⁴⁰ The myth proceeds as follows:

Now king of the gods, Zeus made Metis his first wife,

⁴⁰ Buxton, *The Complete World of Greek Mythology*, 44-48.

Wiser than any other god, or any mortal man.
But when she was about to deliver the owl-eyed goddess
Athena, Zeus tricked her, gulled her with crafty words,
And stuffed her in his stomach, taking the advice
Of Earth and starry Heaven. They told him to do this
So that no one but Zeus would hold the title of King
Among the eternal gods, for it was predestined
That very wise children would be born from Metis,
First the gray-eyed girl, Tritogeneia,
Equal to her father in strength and wisdom,
But then a son with an arrogant heart
Who would one day be king of gods and men. (*Theo.*, 891-903)⁴¹

Due to this insightful move, the prophesied son was never born, and instead Athena sprang fully armed from Zeus' head:

From [Zeus'] own head he gave birth to owl-eyed Athena,
The awesome, battle-rousing, army-leading, untiring
Lady, whose pleasure is fighting and the metallic din of war. (*Theo.*, 929-931)⁴²

Athena's divine parentage and role in the succession myth provide reasoning for her being female. Primarily, her birth as a daughter reinforces Zeus' long rule, as the prophesized son will never arrive to dethrone him.⁴³ Instead, his child is Athena, who, as a daughter, is perfectly able and willing to wield her power and authority beneath his own. Athena's birth myth both reinforces Zeus' position of power and her own authority. In addition, Athena's association with Zeus also supports her association with warfare. This connection is illustrated by Athena's ability

⁴¹ Hesoid, *Theogony*, trans. Stephen M. Trzaskoma (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2004), 156.

⁴² Ibid., 157.

⁴³ Neils, "Athena, Alter Ego of Zeus," 219-232.

to wield the *aegis*, which primarily belongs to Zeus. By passing the *aegis* to his daughter, Zeus justifies and supports Athena's warlike nature, thereby confirming her martial role in myth.

Furthermore, Homeric Hymn 28 depicts the moment of Athena's birth and the events that immediately follow:

Of Pallas Athena, renowned goddess, I begin to sing, of the grey-eyed, the wise, her of the relentless heart, the maiden revered, the savior of cities, the mighty Tritogeneia. From his holy head Zeus the counselor himself begot her, all armed for war in shining golden armor, while in awe the other gods beheld it. Quickly did the goddess leap from his immortal head and stood before aegis-bearing Zeus, shaking her sharp spear, and high Olympus trembled in dread beneath the strength of the gray-eyed maiden, while the earth rang terribly around, and the sea roiled with dark waves. Then suddenly the sea grew still. The glorious son of Hyperion checked for a long time his swift steeds till the maiden, Pallas Athena, took from her immortal shoulders her divine armor, and Zeus the counselor rejoiced. Hail to you, child of aegis-bearing Zeus, now I will be mindful of you and of another song.⁴⁴

At the moment of her birth, Athena is clothed in full armor, wielding her spear. This image of a woman dressed in armor appears to be at odds with the ancient Greek understanding of the civilized order of the world, where only men wear armor and participate in warfare. As a result, the cosmic terror referenced in the Hymn could be interpreted as Athena's arrival in armor upsetting the divine order of the world. It is only after Athena removes her armor that Zeus and Olympus rejoice, as it is symbolic of Athena abiding to and respecting the traditional order of the

⁴⁴ Homer, *The Homeric Hymns*, 208.

world. Though Athena is representative of war, and fully participates in the martial sphere in her subsequent myths, this willingness to preserve Greek values is integral to her depiction.⁴⁵

Athena's association with wisdom can also be derived from her birth myth. It is obvious that her martial power arises from Zeus, who was the most powerful of the Greek gods. Her wisdom, on the other hand, comes from Metis, who was the wisest of the gods.⁴⁶ Athena's ancestry grants her both power and wisdom, thereby emphasizing the relative importance of these characteristics to her overall nature. In addition, her wisdom is tied closely to how she chooses to use her martial ability. While warfare can be associated with senseless violence and bloodlust, Athena's use of warfare is practical and measured, which can be attributed to her wisdom. This idea is discussed further in the next section.

The circumstances and events of Athena's birth reinforce how her martial nature is put in service of upholding and protecting tradition and civilized order, which are both important to the Greek state. Athena's birth as a female reinforces Zeus' rule, and her willingness to remove her armor suggests her inclination to preserve traditional values, rather than challenge them. This idea is also reflected in how she uses her warrior ability to protect cities and people who exhibit desirable Greek values, as discussed in the previous sections.

Athena and Ares

In Greek myth, there are two major deities of war: Athena and Ares. Though he is male, Ares embodies the negative aspects of war, such as violence and bloodlust, and so provides an

⁴⁵ Deacy, "Athena and Ares: War, Violence and Warlike Deities," 285-298.

⁴⁶ Smith, *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology*, 398.

interesting contrast to Athena, who represents the more positive aspects of war, such as restraint and practical judgement.⁴⁷

It is important to note how the deities align themselves in the Trojan War. While Ares aligns himself with the Trojans, Athena supports the Greeks. This already sets up an interesting contrast, as the epic aligns Athena with Greek society and Ares with their enemy. As discussed previously, the Trojans are depicted with heroic qualities in *The Iliad*, despite being the enemies of the Greeks. This idea can also be expanded to the Greek view of Ares. Though he represents the more negative aspects of warfare, which are not desirable in battle, he must still be respected and worshipped, as he is part of the divine Olympic pantheon.

In *The Iliad*, a comparison between Athena's and Ares' respective martial roles can be used to understand the nature of their warlike characters. Athena and Ares are both shown marshalling their forces for battle. Athena leads the Greeks, while Ares fights with the Trojans:

[T]hey advanced under the leadership of Ares and Pallas Athene. These were gold, wore golden clothes and looked as big and beautiful in their armor as gods should, standing out above their troops who were on a smaller scale. (*Il.* 18.516-519)⁴⁸

Both Athena and Ares are shown leading their respective armies, which creates a direct parallel between their martial spheres. In addition, their descriptions mirror each other, as they are both represented with golden armor and standing above their troops. These lines illustrate the similarity of Athena and Ares' function in this war, as they are both seen in a primarily military role, commanding their armies for battle.

⁴⁷ Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 139-143, 169-170

⁴⁸ Homer, *The Iliad*, 333.

But, ultimately, Ares still sides with the ill-fated Trojans while Athena sides with the victorious Greeks, as depicted in the following excerpt:

While Athene raised her war-cry, standing now by the ditch beyond the Greek wall, and now sending her voice down the thundering shore, she was answered on the other side by Ares, who resembled a black squall and screamed his orders to the Trojans, at one moment from the heights of the citadel, at the next from the banks of River Simoïs, as he ran along the slopes of Callicolone. (*Il.* 20.48-54)⁴⁹

Athena's war cry is echoed by Ares' call to battle, which again provides both a parallel and a contrast. Both deities are rallying their troops for war, but Athena fights with the Greeks while Ares fights with the Trojans. Athena is firmly associated with Greek identity, and so she aligns her martial ability with those who best embody it. On the other hand, Ares aligns himself with the Trojans, and ultimately, the losing side of the war.

The Iliad features many instances of heroic bravery by heroes on either side of the battlefield. At these moments of warlike excellence, many of the heroes are said to become the equal of Ares. These heroes include "Pylaemenes, Ares' equal" (*Il.* 5.576), "Meriones equal of swift Ares" (*Il.* 13.297), and "Achilles ... equal of the murderous War-god Ares" (*Il.* 20.43-46).⁵⁰ Though Homeric heroes regularly become the equal of Ares in moments of epic strength, it is never said that mortal heroes ever become the equal of Athena. This contrast can be interpreted as representing Athena's unattainable martial skill and her relative superiority over Ares in the realm of warfare. This idea can be explained, in part, by Athena's more restrained and civilized

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 350.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 90, 224, 350.

approach to war. In the above passage, Ares is described as a “the murderous War-god,” which indicates how he bows to and is consumed by war’s violence and rage. Mortal men can easily attain this state, as shown in the above excerpts. Athena’s wisdom allows her to take a more restrained and civilized approach to warfare, which is not as easily reached by mortal men, and as a result, mortal heroes are never equated to her.

Finally, and perhaps most conclusively, Athena’s superiority is directly shown when she defeats Ares in battle in *The Iliad*. Ares directly challenges Athena, as he has not forgotten how she guided Diomedes’ spear to wound him. Their battle proceeds as follows:

The murderous Ares lunged with his long spear. Athene drew back and with her great hand picked up a rock ... She threw this and struck wild Ares on the neck, bringing him down. There with a great clatter of armor he fell, covering seven acres, with his hair in the dust. (*Il.* 21.402-409)⁵¹

This scene shows the direct martial competition between Athena and Ares and shows her ultimate victory. After Ares’ defeat at her hand, Athena replies, “You stupid fool! It never occurred to you, before you matched yourself with me, to consider how much stronger I was” (*Il.* 21.410-412).⁵² The epic explicitly states her superiority in the realm of warfare, which reinforces Athena’s elevated position in the Greek pantheon, as she is repeatedly shown to be Ares’ superior.

⁵¹ Ibid., 374.

⁵² Ibid., 374.

In addition to *The Iliad*, there are other mythological sources that highlight the difference between Athena's and Ares' martial depictions. In Hesoid's *Shield of Heracles*, the descriptions of Athena and Ares side by side emphasizes the differences in their warlike natures:

... deadly Ares the spoil-winner himself. He held a spear in his hands and was urging on his footmen: he was red with blood as if he were slaying living men, and he stood in his chariot. Beside him stood Fear and Flight, eager to plunge amidst the fighting men.

There, too, was the daughter of Zeus, Tritogeneia who drives the spoil. She was like as if she would array a battle, with a spear in her hand, and a golden helmet, and the aegis about her shoulders.⁵³

In this excerpt, Ares is covered in blood and accompanied by Deimos (Terror) and Phobos (Fear), while Athena is clothed in the *aegis*. Ares is quite explicitly embodying the rage and violence of war, as he is drenched in blood and is accompanied by Deimos and Phobos, physical representations of the dark and negative parts of warfare. On the other hand, Athena wears her *aegis* and carries a weapon, both of which are external and detachable from her person, thereby reinforcing her warlike character as ultimately disciplined and strategic. Ares' affinity for warfare is an integral and violent part of his character, while Athena's martial ability is practical and civilized. Simply put, while Ares is consumed by war, Athena uses it as a tool to reach a specific end.⁵⁴

Athena's use of warfare as a tool is perhaps a result of her association with wisdom.

Wisdom is one of Athena's most important aspects, as it influences nearly every one of her other

⁵³ Hesoid, *Shield of Heracles*, trans. H. G. Evelyn-White (London: William Heinemann, 1914).

⁵⁴ Deacy, "Athena and the Amazons," 153-168.

spheres of activity.⁵⁵ Athena's manifestation of her warlike ability is steady and strategic, and she is never taken over by violence or battle lust. She practices disciplined warfare, which was preferable over the uncontrollable violence that also comes from battle. This provides an important contrast to Ares' warlike character, which has been shown to be violent and all-consuming. Athena's wisdom provides a basis for her choice to use her martial ability in this disciplined and strategic manner. In a broader sense, Athena's wisdom also relates to how she uses her martial ability to preserve and uphold traditional Greek values, as the maintenance of tradition would have been seen as an inherently wise thing to do.

Concluding Remarks

Athena uses war to uphold the Greek state, which is seen in her defense of cities and heroes who embody the ideals of Greek culture. She chooses cities and heroes worthy of her regard, and bestows her protection accordingly. Athena's role as protector of the *polis* is of particular interest in this chapter, as it is perhaps the most direct manifestation of her overall duty to maintain the Greek state. This idea will be explored further in later chapters, as it provides an interesting connection with the domestic duties of actual Greek women, and how these duties were also geared toward preserving the Greek state. Athena also internally upholds Greek society by bowing to tradition, as seen in her birth myth. This myth also connects her power to Zeus', which arguably helps justify her warlike nature as an extension of his own.

⁵⁵ Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 139-143; Buxton, *The Complete World of Classical Mythology*, 79-80.

Ultimately, Athena uses all of her power and spheres of influence to maintain Greek society and its values. Her warlike character is neither senselessly violent nor without purpose. It is always used rationally to protect and uphold the state and its values. Though Athena is a female deity, her association with warfare can be at least partially explained by her motivation to protect Greek gendered society. She never directly challenged the gendered notions that kept women in the household and men on the battlefield. Instead, the war goddess fought to uphold the traditions and values that kept Greek society strictly separated in this manner. Perhaps paradoxically, a female war goddess was used to maintain the traditional values of the gendered society that worshipped her.

Chapter 2: Other Warlike Women in Greek Myth

This chapter will cover other women in Greek myth who exhibit warlike tendencies, such as the Amazons and Atalante. These women are not divine goddesses, but they are still major characters in the Greek mythological canon. Importantly, these women are mortal heroes, and so are subject to constraints that divine females are free from. There may be a different level of tolerance for mythological female figures to transgress into the male realm, depending on if they are mortal or immortal. Athena is divine and so exists apart from mortal men and society. Consequently, she has the freedom to subvert the natural order by being both female and a war deity. On the other hand, the female warriors examined in this chapter are mortal and therefore subject to men and the natural order, as determined by the Greeks. It follows that these women must face the consequences of transgressing into male spheres, such as warfare. This chapter will explore the respective myths of these women, and draw a comparison between mortal and immortal femininity, and its relation to warfare.

Amazons

The Amazons were a mythical group of warrior women who lived on the periphery of civilized Greek society. The Amazonian society was an inversion of accepted gender roles, as it was “ruled by women, and that the women, like the men, had a hand in the business of war.”⁵⁶ There are conflicting versions of their myths, but if men were even present in Amazonian society, they were charged with “a life of degradation and servitude.”⁵⁷ When Amazons gave birth to children, the girls were kept and trained as full warriors while the boys were given away,

⁵⁶ Diodorus of Sicily, *The Amazons* from *Historical Library*, trans. Stephen M. Trzaskoma (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2004), 94.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 94.

kept as slaves, or killed. Women dominated the public spheres in which men typically operated, including politics and warfare.⁵⁸

In *The Iliad*, Homer refers to the Amazons as “a match for men” (*Il.* 3.189).⁵⁹ The Amazons were considered well-matched to their Greek counterparts, but were almost always in hostile opposition to the male Greek heroes. Many myths, including the events of the Trojan War, include men fighting and ultimately defeating the Amazons. However, though the Amazons were considered enemies, they also exhibited heroic qualities. For instance, the defeat of an Amazon queen in battle was addressed as “a heroic end.”⁶⁰ In this instance, it seems as if the “heroic” description is simply a recognition of the skill possessed by the Amazons, rather than any commentary on heroism in the modern definition. In short, the Amazons “fall not short of men in anything: their labour-hardened frames make great their hearts for all achievement: never faint their knees nor tremble.”⁶¹ The Amazons were worthy opponents to Greek heroes, and as such, they themselves were considered heroes.

Despite their heroic characterization, the Amazons were ultimately a cautionary story. They served as an example of barbarity, or an inversion of everything civilized society represented, and so were not to be emulated.⁶² This idea can be seen in the representation of the Amazons in Greek art. Before the Persian War, the Amazons were depicted as white figures wearing Greek armor.⁶³ The strange contrast of women wearing armor clearly placed the Amazons outside the realm of accepted gender roles, effectively “othering” them from civilized

⁵⁸ Josine H. Blok, *The Early Amazons: Modern and Ancient Perspectives on a Persistent Myth* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 1995), 1-2.

⁵⁹ Homer, *The Iliad*, 104.

⁶⁰ Diodorus of Sicily, *The Amazons from Historical Library*, 95.

⁶¹ Quintus Smyrnaeus, *The Fall of Troy*, trans. A. S. Way (London: William Heinemann, 1913), 1.618

⁶² Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece*, 62.

⁶³ In black-figure pottery, men were shown in black and women were shown in white.

Greek society. In the later time periods following the Persian War, the Amazons were equated with foreign invaders to further emphasize their “otherness.” In particular, the Amazons were heavily associated with the Persians themselves, who invaded the Greek homeland in the early part of the fifth century BCE during the aforementioned Persian War. This historical event was neatly paralleled by the mythological Amazonian invasion of Greece, which will be recounted in greater detail later in this section. There were numerous Athenian vase paintings in the fifth century BCE depicting the Amazons wearing Persian armor and wielding Persian weapons.⁶⁴ Consequently, these parallels served to increasingly distance the Amazons from the Greeks.

After the Persian invasion of Greece in 480 BCE, the Parthenon was erected in the place of a temple that was destroyed in the war. This new temple was a symbol of Greek victory over foreign invaders, and the myths carved into the temple were loose reflections of this victory. For example, the defeat of the Amazons, or the Amazonomachy, is depicted on the west side of the temple.⁶⁵ This depiction of the Amazonomachy could be interpreted to represent the triumph of civilization against barbarity, respectively represented by the Greeks and the Amazons. The portrayal of the Amazons in this context further distances them from the Greeks, and by extension, from what was considered proper and civilized.

Though the Amazons possessed great skill, they were always defeated by male Greek heroes. In most of their myths, the Amazons were subjected to general themes of domination, as their defeats represented the eventual victory of civilized society over uncivilized society. The rest of this section will explore the myths of three Amazon women (Hippolyte, Penthesilea, and Antiope) and how their eventual defeats all contribute to the narrative about women and warfare.

⁶⁴ In addition, the Amazons were shown wearing animal skins and hides to further emphasize their wild barbarism and distance from civilized society.

⁶⁵ Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece*, 61-62.

Both Hippolyte and Penthesilea were Amazons who were defeated in single combat by a Greek hero, Herakles and Achilles respectively. Hippolyte was the queen of the Amazons, and Herakles was charged to steal her belt as one of his labors. He did so, killing Hippolyte in the process.⁶⁶ In some versions of the myth, Herakles also defeated the Amazons all-together, as he “marched out and, in winning a great battle, cut down the army of the Amazons, captured Hippolyte with her war belt, and completely wiped out this tribe.”⁶⁷ In either case, the Amazons were soundly defeated by a Greek hero. Penthesilea was another Amazonian warrior, who fought on the side of the Trojans in the Trojan War. During the battle, she fought Achilles in single combat, which resulted in her death.⁶⁸ In some versions of the myth, Achilles falls in love with Penthesilea as she dies, and regrets having killed her.⁶⁹ There are a number of interpretations of this particular ending, but it bears mentioning that Achilles only falls in love with Penthesilea *after* her defeat. This ending could indicate that she was only womanly and attractive to him after she had been proven inferior to him in battle. However, in both of these cases, the Amazon women were well-renowned for their strength and skill in war. As mentioned before, they exhibited heroic qualities to the Greeks, and ultimately were given heroic deaths. Nevertheless, they were both defeated by male Greek heroes.

There are many versions of the following myth, but in general, Antiope is an Amazon who was taken and wedded by Theseus, a hero of Greek myth. He subsequently brought her back to Athens. In retaliation to this, the Amazons invaded the Greek mainland and marched on Athens, where they laid siege to the Acropolis. They were eventually defeated by Theseus and

⁶⁶ Hyginus, *The Twelve Labors Imposed on Hercules by Eurystheus*, trans. Stephen M. Trzaskoma (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2004), 225.

⁶⁷ Diodorus of Sicily, *The Amazons* from *Historical Library*, 95.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁶⁹ Elizabeth Constantinides, “Amazons and other Female Warriors,” *The Classical Outlook* 59, no. 1 (October-November 1981): 3-6.

his forces.⁷⁰ In some versions, Antiope actually fights at her husband's side, against her former people.⁷¹ The major theme that can be drawn from this myth rests on the struggle between civilization and barbarity (or an inversion of civilized values), as embodied by the Athenians and Amazons respectively. As mentioned before, the Amazons are antagonists of the Greeks in nearly every myth, and therefore are defeated as a representation of the triumph of civilized society over a primitive and barbaric one, where women were warriors.

Furthermore, the patron deity of the Amazons is Ares. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Ares, the Greek god of war, is associated with the negative aspects of warfare and operated primarily on the periphery of civilized society. All of the Amazons supposedly referred to themselves as the "daughter[s] of Ares."⁷² The link between the Amazons and Ares characterizes the warrior women as violent and brutal. While the Amazons clearly possessed admirable skill in warfare, their association with Ares defines their skill as undesirable. To this end, the Amazons "were by no means gentle, well-conducted folk; they were brutal and aggressive, and their main concern in life was war. War indeed, was in their blood, daughters of Ares as they were."⁷³ In addition, the Amazons were also equated with Artemis in some accounts.⁷⁴ Artemis was the Greek goddess of the hunt, and is often associated with the wilderness, rather than the civilized city center, similarly to Ares.⁷⁵ By associating the Amazons with deities such as Ares and Artemis, they are effectively distanced from all that was considered civilized and proper in Greek society.

It bears mentioning that the Amazons, though heroic and warlike, were associated with Ares and Artemis rather than Athena. As discussed in Chapter 1, Athena's willingness to guide

⁷⁰ Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece*, 60.

⁷¹ Deacy, "Athena and the Amazons," 157.

⁷² Diodorus of Sicily, *The Amazons* from *Historical Library*, 94.

⁷³ Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica*, trans. Rieu (London: Willian Heinemann Ltd, 1912), 2.989.

⁷⁴ Diodorus of Sicily, *The Amazons* from *Historical Library*, 95.

⁷⁵ Artemis' character will be discussed further in the next section on Atalante.

Greek heroes is a prevalent theme in her myths. However, it is important to note that Athena chooses to only bestow her guidance on those worthy of it. The Amazons inverted all of the principles that Greek society valued by putting women in typically male-dominated areas of society. Therefore, it follows that Athena, who is clearly associated with civilized values, would not be the patron deity of the Amazons. In turn, by associating the Amazons with Ares and Artemis, they are put at a distance from the civilized center of Greek society.

Though the Amazons were considered heroic by the Greek definition, they were ultimately both distanced from and defeated by a more civilized group of people, who obeyed the Greek-defined natural order of gendered societies. However, while the Amazons' warlike natures led to their demise, Athena was worshipped for her warlike nature. This contrast can be attributed to the differences between mortal and immortal femininity in Greek myth. The Amazons are mortal and therefore do not have the freedom to transcend the natural order of the world, as understood by Greek culture, without facing the consequences. Athena, on the other hand, is immortal and free to embody warfare.

Atalante

Atalante is one of the few warlike female heroes who is decidedly Greek. As a child, she was abandoned by her father, as he had wanted a boy instead. A she-bear suckled her, and she was raised in the wilds. She is often associated with Artemis, who is the goddess of the hunt. Atalante also enjoyed hunting and wrestling, both of which were typically masculine pursuits.⁷⁶ The myths discussed in this section feature boar hunting and footraces, both of which were

⁷⁶ Buxton, *The Complete World of Greek Mythology*, 106-107.

decidedly male sports.⁷⁷ Her name is derived from the Greek word *atalantos*, which translates to “equal in weight.”⁷⁸ The meaning of her name suggests that Atalante is meant to be equal to her male counterparts in ability. Even the story of her birth neatly fits into the typical narrative of a male Greek hero. She was abandoned in the wilderness, nurtured by an animal, easily recognized by mortals as heroic (due to her stature), and has the favor of a deity. The myths of Atalante possess all of the familiar beats of those of a Greek hero, but ultimately, her gender leads to her experiencing the consequences of a woman operating in typically male-dominated spheres.

In one of her major myths, Atalante participated in the Calydonian boar hunt. After the king of Calydon slighted Artemis, she sent a ferocious boar to attack the kingdom as a symbol of her wrath. Desperate, the king called for all Greek heroes to come and hunt the boar, promising that the winner would take the boar’s hide as a prize. Atalante was invited amongst the group of male Greek heroes, because one of them, Meleagros, wanted to have a child by her even though he was already married. During the hunt, Atalante was the first to wound the boar, but Meleagros was the one who killed it in the end. He then gifted her the boar’s hide. However, Meleagros’ uncles thought it was disgraceful for a woman to receive the prize, and so Meleagros killed them in the ensuing struggle. In retaliation for killing her brothers, his grieving mother then killed Meleagros.⁷⁹ Again, the theme of breaking the *oikos* is heavily present here. By choosing a woman like Atalante, Meleagros ultimately disrupted the integrity of his family unit both by being unfaithful to his wife and by killing his uncles. The consequences of this disruption led to Meleagros’ death, at the hands of his own mother. Though Atalante excels in the hunt just as a

⁷⁷ Another myth depicts Atalante defeating the Greek hero Peleus in a wrestling match. Wrestling was also considered a masculine activity. See “Atalanta,” Theoi Greek Mythology, accessed April 25, 2020, <https://www.theoi.com/Heroine/Atalanta.html>

⁷⁸ Theoi Greek Mythology, “Atalanta.”

⁷⁹ Apollodorus, *Oineus, Meleagros, and the Calydonian Boar Hunt* from *Library*, trans. Stephen M. Trzaskoma (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2004), 23-24.

male Greek hero would, her mere participation in this male-dominated event arguably caused the tragic events of this myth. Consequently, this myth becomes a cautionary tale against a woman participating in an event meant only for men.

In another myth, when Atalante reached marriageable age, she refused to take a husband unless he could beat her in a footrace. If the suitor lost the race, she would kill him. Many men tried to best her and failed, until a man called Hippomenes (or Meneleon in some versions) distracted her by throwing golden apples on the ground. Distracted “as she collected the apples and admired the gold,” Atalante faltered during the race and Hippomenes beat her. As a consequence, she was married to him. However, Hippomenes forgot to thank the goddess Aphrodite who gave him the apples, and as a result, she turned him into a lion and Atalante into a lioness.⁸⁰ The myth of Atalante’s footrace can be interpreted within the Greek mindset toward gender. There is a side to women that was considered “wild,” which must be properly tamed by marriage and domestic life.⁸¹ This idea was often represented in myth by Artemis, who was the goddess of the hunt, virginity, and transition to adulthood.⁸² Artemis specifically represented the transition from young girl to wife, who was tamed by marriage. In this case, a man tried to tame Atalante’s “wildness,” but instead, they both ended up returning to the wild state that Atalante came from. This ending could indicate the incompatibility between the role of wife, and future mother, with the activities of hunting and warfare.⁸³ Again, this interpretation turns this myth into another cautionary tale, in which a warlike women faces the consequences of her transgressive nature.

⁸⁰ Hyginus, *Atalante* from *Stories*, trans. Stephen M. Trzaskoma (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2004), 269.

⁸¹ Buxton, *The Complete World of Greek Mythology*, 107.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 76.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 107.

In addition, it bears mentioning the reason Atalante lost the footrace. She lost due to a supposedly womanly fascination with the golden apples. Even though she was considered an equal to men, she still was subjected to the perceived weaknesses of her gender. This idea could be connected to the discussion on mortal versus immortal femininity in the previous section. In this case, Atalante is a mortal woman and therefore subject to the constraints of mortality, and more importantly, to the constraints of her gender.

Atalante's heavy association with Artemis is also a point of interest. A common theme in Greek myth is the division between civilization and untamed wilderness. Civilization was associated with the city-centers, where art and politics and culture flourished. Conversely, the untamed wilderness was something to be tamed and brought into society. The significance of Artemis' worship is tied back to the transition between wild and domesticated. Artemis represents the young girls that have yet to be settled by marriage, and so were thought to be wild and untamed. When the young girls are married, they are tamed and brought into civil and domesticated society, where they will then function primarily in their households. Consequently, gods like Artemis were associated with the wilderness, whereas gods like Athena were associated with the city-centers. By tying herself to Artemis, Atalante is distanced from all that is civil and domestic. This idea distances her from Greek civilization and marks her as something to ultimately be tamed and brought into society.

Again, Athena is notably absent from Atalante's myths, just as she is from the myths of the Amazons. As discussed in Chapter 1, Athena is famously known for her patronage of Greek heroes, yet she does not guide or assist these female heroes in any way. Instead, Atalante and the Amazons were associated with deities like Artemis and Ares, who were both more associated with the periphery than with civilization. Athena's distance from these warriors offers further

commentary on the Greek attitude toward women and warfare. If Athena represents and upholds civilized values, then her detachment from these women implies their lack of those values. This idea potentially reveals more about the Greek mindset towards women who embody masculine characteristics, such as warfare. It seems as if divinity grants Athena the freedom to be a goddess of war and have supposedly masculine characteristics, while mortal female warriors are subject to the constraints and limitations of their gender.

Concluding Remarks

These mythical women serve as cautionary tales that warn against the consequences of a woman participating in masculine realms, such as hunting and warfare. Most of their myths end in varying levels of tragedy or defeat, due to their transgressive natures. In the Greek mindset, it was considered improper for women to embody any traditionally masculine characteristics, and so these myths punished them accordingly.

Athena's divinity grants her freedom from these restraints, as she embodies warfare without consequence. This idea adds another layer to justifying the presence of a female war goddess in a traditionally patriarchal society. Her divinity makes her abilities unattainable, and therefore, not truly applicable to everyday life. These societies did not allow their women to be warriors, but seemed to entertain the idea of war goddesses because of their immortality and resulting distance from reality.

Chapter 3: Women in Ancient Greece

This chapter will explore the sociocultural roles of women in ancient Greek society, in order to explore the implications of worshipping a warlike goddess. The eras of ancient Greece are divided by time period. For the purposes of this thesis, the role of women in the Archaic Age (750-500 BCE) and the Classical Age (500-336 BCE) will be examined, along with their roles in ritual and religion.⁸⁴ In general, this chapter will discuss how the domestic responsibilities of women were linked to the preservation of the Greek city-state, which can then be tied to Athena's role as protector of the *polis*, or Athena Polias. Female roles in ritual and religion are also examined in this chapter, as it is important to consider the ways in which women participated in ritual tradition, as well as how female deities were worshipped. The ritual role of women opens interesting questions about the role of women in Greek society, as well as reveals a potential connection between divine femininity and warfare.

The Archaic Age

The Archaic Age of Greece marked the development of the independent Greek city-states, known as *poleis* (singular, *polis*). Each of these city-states featured an urban center surrounded by agricultural land. The urban centers were the sites of trade, civic meetings, and religious worship. Throughout the Archaic Age, hundreds of *poleis* developed, marking the establishment of Greek regional identity.⁸⁵ This was also the time when Homeric epic poetry was written down in the forms we have today, though the events of the poems reference an earlier era of mythological heroes.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece*, 63-170.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 64.

In this section, the roles of Greek women in the Archaic Age will be examined to understand Athena's depiction and worship. However, there is difficulty in this form as analysis, as there is not much surviving historical evidence about Greek women during the Archaic time period. Most of the information actually comes from the epic poetry of Homer and Hesoid, and so must be understood as somewhat unreliable, as these works feature heavy amounts of mythological events. In addition, these works reference a bygone era, and thus may not be representative of the time period in which they were written down.⁸⁷ However, though these sources represent an idealized version of the time period, the sociocultural information drawn from them is still valuable for this form of analysis.

The rise of the *polis* did not mean that the *oikos*, or the family unit, lost its influence as a fundamental element of Greek society. In fact, the stability of the *oikos* became intimately tied to the prosperity of the *polis*. The *oikos* was known as the main social unit of the *polis*, and consisted of a husband, wife, unmarried children, married sons and their families, and servants. The term simultaneously represents both the land and possessions of the family, as well as more intangible assets, such as its value as a legal, symbolic, and religious unit.⁸⁸ These units existed in a mutually beneficial relationship with the *polis* at large, as the city provided the *oikos* protection from external enemies and the *oikos* owed the city economic and military obligations. The stability of the *oikos* often translated to stability of the *polis* at large, and as a result, it was very important that Greek families maintained their integrity.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 65.

⁸⁸ Pierre Brulé, *Women of Ancient Greece*, trans. Antonia Nevill (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), 4.

The maintenance of the *oikos* was largely left to the women, who had the primary duty to fulfill their roles as wives and mothers to preserve the integrity of the family unit.⁸⁹ Women were expected to tend to their duties within the domestic sphere. For upper-class women, this included the management of servants as well as childbearing. For lower-class women, their duties also extended to cooking, cleaning, and other household tasks. However, in contrast to later time periods, women were not kept isolated within their homes.⁹⁰ This freedom is suggested by the behavior of the princess Nausicaa in *The Odyssey*. She was able to leave her house and go to a river to wash clothes. She was even depicted playing a ball game with her female slaves, and was compared to “Artemis the archer” (*Od.* 6.101).⁹¹

In addition to their domestic duties, women were responsible for the entirety of the textile industry, which was a vital contribution to the household’s economic activities. Weaving was women’s work, and often marked female accomplishment.⁹² As mentioned in Chapter 1, Athena was known for her patronage of the crafts, including the art of weaving. This was one of the only feminine spheres in which Athena operated, as she distanced herself from other feminine pursuits, such as childbirth and motherhood. The importance of weaving as a feminine pursuit is heavily featured in *The Odyssey*. Penelope, the wife of Odysseus, embodies all of the values that a proper Greek woman should possess. She uses her skill at weaving and her cleverness to survive the long years as she waits for her husband’s return after the Trojan War. In his absence, various suitors bother her for her hand in marriage, to which she replies that she will choose a husband after she has finished weaving a shroud. Every night, she unwinds the progress of the

⁸⁹ Ibid., 66-69.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 69-72

⁹¹ Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Emily Wilson (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2018), 6.101.

⁹² Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece*, 72.

day's work, so that the shroud will never be finished. She is faithful to her husband, and uses her wits and cleverness to preserve her *oikos* to the best of her ability.

Ultimately, the Archaic Age was marked by increased urbanization, as the city-centers of the *poleis* grew both in wealth and population. As the cities grew, there was a greater restriction on the divide between the private and public spheres, where women and men, respectively, primarily operated. Some scholars believe that this shift may have led to increased restrictions on women's freedoms leading into the Classical Age.⁹³

Overall, the Archaic Age does not provide any overt examples of historical women following Athena's warlike activities, though women were indeed associated with her realm of crafts and weaving. However, a connection can be drawn between women's primary role in the maintenance of the *oikos* and Athena's role as Athena Polias, the protector of the city. As mentioned previously, women were largely tasked with domestic affairs, such as household management, childbearing, and weaving. All of these activities contributed to maintaining the stability of the *oikos*. The *polis* itself was constructed from a coalition of many different *oikos* units. The stability and security of the *polis* relied, in large part, on the strength of the *oikos*. Just as a building cannot stand without a foundation, the *polis* would not survive without the stability of the *oikos*. Consequently, the importance of women's domestic work was actually tied closely to the functioning of the *polis* at large. This idea is reflected in Athena's role as protector of the city. One of Athena's major mythological functions is this protective role, which ensured that Greek city-states remained stable and strong. Without her presence and protection, the *polis* would fall. While Athena attended to her duty in a more warlike manner, women attended to

⁹³ Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece*, 76.

theirs in a domestic manner. Even so, in this context, both Athena's and the women's roles were directed toward maintaining the stability of the *polis*.

The Classical Age

The Classical Age of Greece lasted from 500-336 BCE. The early part of the fifth century BCE was marked by Persian invasion of Greece. The Persian army was able to conquer over half of the Greek mainland before a coalition of Greek city-states, led by Athens and Sparta, banded together to defeat them. These military victories helped cement the idea of Greek identity, which developed opposite to what Greeks deemed foreign and barbaric, represented by the Persian invaders. This division between national and foreign (civilized and barbaric, respectively) also extended to much of Greek thought during this period, including to characters in myth, as discussed in previous chapters.⁹⁴

In the aftermath of the Persian Wars, the resulting power vacuum of the Persian defeat was taken advantage of by the Athenian and Spartan city-states. In particular, Athens created a massive naval league to protect against further invasion. The Athenian navy opened a path to develop a trade monopoly over the Aegean area, leading to a massive increase in Athenian wealth. In turn, this increase in trade and wealth contributed to the large-scale cultural and political achievement during the Athenian Classical Age. In particular, the people of Athens invested in the construction of temples and sculptures, produced art and drama, and wrote philosophical treatises. In addition, this period also marked the development of the famed

⁹⁴ Ibid., 95.

Athenian democratic political system, in which important decisions were all made on the basis of a majority vote of the Athenian male citizenry.⁹⁵

However, despite the political and cultural advancement of the time, women in Athens were prohibited from participating in either area in any recognized way. Women were not recognized as *politai*, or citizens with full political rights. Instead, they were referred to as *astai*, which means citizens with only civil rights. From a young age, girls and boys were already separated into their respective spheres. At age 6, boys were sent off to school and girls were kept to their homes to learn household tasks. There is little evidence to suggest that women received any education outside their homes.⁹⁶

Women were expected to remain in the private domestic sphere, where they managed the household and bore children. This was particularly true of upper-class women, who were entirely restricted to their homes and were not even permitted to leave to go shopping in the marketplaces. Either their husbands or their slaves would perform all of the tasks that required them to leave the house. These women's duties in the household were mainly managerial, as they oversaw the servants and sometimes domestic finances. However, this was not economically feasible for lower-class women, as they did not have the resources to maintain servants. So, lower-class women performed more of the domestic work themselves, such as cooking, cleaning, and child-rearing. In addition, lower-class women were able to hold work outside their own households as washerwomen, wet-nurses, and midwives. Furthermore, these restrictions were additionally loosened out in the countryside, where it was even less feasible for women to remain indoors when there was farm work to be done.⁹⁷ However, in general, women were expected to

⁹⁵ Ibid., 95-96.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 132-133.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 133-145.

remain in the household and manage domestic affairs. As in the Archaic Age, women were tasked with these duties to ultimately maintain the stability of the *oikos*.

Within the domestic sphere, weaving and wool-working were vital parts of the economy, as they were in the Archaic Age. The households would produce cloth made from wool, which was the most common, or from flax, which was used by upper-class households to make finer garments. As mentioned earlier, weaving was a sign of female accomplishment, and women often even gifted work from their looms to their deities.⁹⁸ It again bears mentioning that Athena is the patron goddess of weaving and craftsmanship, as evidenced by her epithet Athena Ergane (or worker).⁹⁹ The goddess' association with handicraft is also thought to have been commemorated by the Panathenaic festival, in which a procession carried a sacred robe to the statue of Athena on the Acropolis.¹⁰⁰ This festival will be discussed in greater detail in the following section on ritual and religion.

The segregation of women extended even to various social functions, such as *symposium*, which was a drinking party where men talked with each other and were entertained by various performers. Athenian citizen women were not permitted to attend these functions, though the performers were often females of a lower social class, including mistresses and courtesans. However, some social events, such as weddings or funerals, may have been attended by both men and women.¹⁰¹

In fact, the only form of female employment with detailed historical record is prostitution. In Athens, prostitution was entirely legal, and it was not unusual or uncommon for a man to visit a few brothels. During this time period, there were many classes of prostitutes,

⁹⁸ Ibid., 141.

⁹⁹ Theoi Greek Mythology, "Athena Titles and Epithets."

¹⁰⁰ Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece*, 26.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 135.

including the *pornai*, who were the common prostitutes in the brothels, and the *pallake*, who were a higher class of prostitutes permitted to walk the streets and act as concubines. The female entertainers at gatherings such as *symposiums* were often hired to provide sexual services as well. Of particular interest is the highest class of prostitutes, known as the *hetaerae* or “courtesan.” These women were costly and sophisticated, and represented the only notable group of financially independent women in Athens during this time period.¹⁰²

Again, the Athenian Classical Age does not reveal any overt examples of women participating in male-dominated spheres, which could have been connected to Athena’s mythological character. In fact, the increased restrictions on women’s freedom resulted in further stratification of female and male areas of activity. However, women still dominated the textile industry, which still held Athena’s patronage. In addition, the primarily domestic role of Athenian women reflected the importance of maintaining the *oikos*. Again, a connection can be drawn between women’s domestic roles and the stability of the *polis* at large.

In contrast to Athens’ maritime and trade dominance, Sparta amassed power on the Greek mainland, leading to it developing as the largest Greek *polis*. Consequently, Sparta was in the unique position of being entirely self-sufficient in food production, and so did not require the establishment of any substantial trade network. In addition to their agricultural self-sufficiency, Sparta ruled over a massive amount of land, where they used the conquered people (known as Helots) as a workforce, instead of importing slaves as other city-states did. This practice led to the development of Sparta’s unusually militaristic social structure, in order to keep the Helots under control.¹⁰³

¹⁰² Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece*, 147-148; Brulé, *Women of Ancient Greece*, 188-192.

¹⁰³ Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece*, 96-97.

At a young age, Spartan boys were taken from their homes and trained as soldiers. The boys were kept apart from their families in order to foster increased obedience to the state and comradeship with fellow soldiers in the military. Due to their upbringing, soldiers often developed more intimate connections with each other than with their own families. As a result, men, even after marriage, were seldom at home. In turn, women exercised more freedom and control over domestic affairs, leading to a relatively liberal and independent culture for women, as compared to other city-states.¹⁰⁴ Women could be landed property owners and wore the Doric peplos as clothing, which had a split side for freedom of movement.¹⁰⁵ In addition, young girls were also trained for athletic competitions and were expected to maintain their physical fitness.¹⁰⁶

However, despite the relative freedoms and unique position of Spartan women, they were still expected to work toward the maintenance of the Spartan state. For instance, the ultimate goal of Spartan women was still to produce and raise legitimate children. Even the emphasis on physically training Spartan girls was to ensure that their children would be born strong and healthy, ready to enter the Spartan military.¹⁰⁷ So, while Spartan women were able to possess more masculine skills, such as athletic training and independence, these skills were still ultimately put in service of traditional purposes. This idea is already familiar as Athena's martial abilities were similarly used in myth, as discussed in Chapter 1.

Though Spartan women experienced relatively more liberal social structures, their ultimate goal was still domestic in nature. Raising strong children to enter the Spartan military was integral to safeguarding the stability of the Spartan *polis*. Consequently, the Spartan women

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 150-151.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 155.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 152.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 156-157.

were still tasked with maintaining the family and the *oikos*, which was directly linked to the security of the *polis*. Despite their unconventional methods, the primary responsibility of Spartan women still mirrored the role of other women in the Classical Age.

Though the Athenian and Spartan Classical Ages provided interesting examples of women's social and cultural roles, there are certain drawbacks of using the social systems of Athens and Sparta as representative examples. Both of these city-states are most likely unique cases and may not have been representative of the Greek mindset in general. For instance, Athens was much wealthier and more powerful than other city-states, and included a large population of slaves and other non-Athenian people. These factors may have affected Athenian women's lives and societal roles.¹⁰⁸ In addition, as mentioned previously, Sparta was also a unique case in that it was agriculturally self-sufficient, and so massive trade networks were unnecessary. As a result, Sparta developed a highly unique social system, without any substantial influence from the surrounding city-states. However, the surviving historical record on Athens and Sparta is much more thorough than for other city-states, and so they were analyzed for the purposes of this thesis.

To reiterate, Athena's warlike character can potentially be justified by examining the domestic roles of women in ancient Greece. In both the Archaic and Classical Ages, the primary responsibility of women was to maintain the integrity of the *oikos*, or the family unit. Women accomplished this task through their domestic duties, such as raising children, managing the household, and taking care of their husbands. In addition, women made an economic contribution to the household by participating in the feminine art of weaving. The purpose of these domestic activities was to strengthen the *oikos*. In turn, the strength of the *oikos* was

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 113.

reflected in the strength of the *polis*. Consequently, one of the primary roles of Greek women in antiquity was to maintain the Greek state, in the form of the *oikos* and the *polis*. This idea can be tied directly to Athena's divine function, which is also to secure the safety and prosperity of the Greek state. All of her spheres of activity, including weaving, crafts, and war, were directed toward reinforcing the strength of Greek society. In this context, the end seems to justify the means, as her warlike character can be rationalized in her use of it to reinforce the Greek state.

Ritual and Religion

This section will cover the ritualistic and religious roles women played in ancient Greece. Though these duties were not performed every day, or even by all women, the themes found in ritual worship provide some interesting insights into the depiction of women in myth.

In general, religion in ancient Greece was practiced both in the *oikos*, with private rituals, and in the *polis*, with larger public festivals. Women were permitted to participate fully in both areas, marking religion as one of the largest acknowledged public spheres in which women were present. Religious officials, who could either be male priests or female priestesses, oversaw public festivals. For the most part, the gender of the religious official depended on the nature of the ritual task or the deity of the cult. Generally, women officiated in the cults of female deities and men in those of male deities. However, there are notable exceptions, as priestesses played prominent roles in the cults of Apollo and Dionysus. These priestesses had to be virgins, as they were meant to serve as a mouthpiece for god. They had to reserve themselves for entry only by the male deity they served, rather than by any mortal man.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 160.

In Classical Athens, the priestess was the only public office that could be held by women, and more than forty major cults had priestesses as religious officials. Of particular interest is the cult of Athena Polias, the patron deity of Athens. This priestess presided over a number of religious celebrations, including the Panathenaea festival to Athena, which was one of the most important state festivals. Every year, young girls assisted in the preparation of a sacred robe, called the *peplos*, which was paraded to the temple of Athena on the Acropolis to clothe her statue. In addition, there were musical performances and an all-night vigil on the Acropolis, both of which were undertaken by young women.¹¹⁰ In addition, this priestess was the only Athenian woman who could be referred to by her personal name in public, which was a liberty reserved typically only for men. In turn, this gave her a somewhat masculine status, similar to Athena herself.¹¹¹ This festival emphasized the ritual importance of Athena to the women of Athens. Nearly every part of this ritual was attended to by women. The sacred *peplos* was prepared by the feminine craft of weaving, and both the procession and ritual itself were undertaken by women.

Another Athenian festival was the Apatouria festival, during which young women presented their girdles to the goddess Athena before marriage.¹¹² The festival celebrated the custom of “[maidens] dedicating their girdles before wedlock to Athena Apaturia,” in order to ensure abstinence until marriage (*Paus.* 2.33.1).¹¹³ Athena’s place in this festival reflected her role in upholding the Greek state’s institutions (in this case, referring to the sanctity of marriage). By presiding over the presentation of the girdles and the dedication of their virginity, this ritual

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 134-135.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 161.

¹¹² Deacy, “Athena and the Amazons,” 159.

¹¹³ Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, trans. W. H. S Jones (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1918), 2.33.1.

role of Athena reinforces the importance of respecting the integrity of the *oikos* by ensuring that young brides save their virginity for their husbands.

In addition, the maiden ritual at the sanctuary of Artemis at Brauron is significant. In Athens, a maiden must be sent to the cult before marriage to be consecrated as *arktoi*, or she-bears. These young girls were secluded at the sanctuary, where they performed ritual dances and ran races.¹¹⁴ The rituals were likely associated with Artemis' role in the transition to adulthood from the wild, untamed *parthenos* (or virgin).¹¹⁵ Pottery fragments from the sanctuary provided evidence that these young girls participated in ritual athletic ceremonies, namely running races. However, there are no other depictions of actual female athletes on Athenian pottery. Instead, mythological women, such as Atalante, are depicted competing in wrestling matches and other athletic competitions. In reality, if women ever did compete athletically in Athens, it would most likely have been in a purely ritual context.¹¹⁶ In any case, this is evidence that young women may have competed in an activity normally undertaken by men, which seems to have been justified by its ritual context. This idea can be connected to female goddesses who participate in male activities (such as Athena's participation in warfare), as they also seem to be justified by their mythical context.

Furthermore, the religious rituals associated with death and burial were also carried out primarily by women. Some scholars believe that burial rites were simply an extension of women's domestic roles. These duties included the washing, anointing, and dressing of corpses,

¹¹⁴ Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 263.

¹¹⁵ Buxton, *The Complete World of Greek Mythology*, 75-77.

¹¹⁶ Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece*, 133-134.

as well as maintaining the graves and providing the offerings.¹¹⁷ In addition, women also carried out the majority of public grieving through the performance of funerary laments.¹¹⁸

The importance of female roles in death rituals is reflected in Sophocles' tragic play *Antigone*. In this play, the titular character's two brothers have killed each other in contest for the throne of the city Thebes, and her uncle Creon has ascended to take power in the aftermath. However, the uncle refuses to bury one of the brothers, and instead leaves his body out to rot. He forbids that funerary rites be taken, under pain of death. Antigone sneaks out and tries to perform the funerary rites anyway, declaring that, "I for one will not be caught betraying him."¹¹⁹ Antigone is caught and sentenced to death for her crimes against the law. However, as a consequence to Creon's actions, "no longer do the gods accept prayers from [them]" and tragedy is prophesied to befall the city of Thebes.¹²⁰ The tragedy takes place at the end of the play, as Antigone hangs herself. This act spurs Creon's son to kill himself, as he was in love with Antigone, which then ends with Creon's wife killing herself in grief over her dead son.

The play reflects some interesting ideas about the relationship between women's role in ritual and its connection to the preservation of the *oikos*, and ultimately, to the stability of the *polis*. Antigone's decision to bury her brother and her unflinching defense of the act reflect her dedication to her duties as a female member of the *oikos*. As mentioned previously, women were charged with the funerary rites as an extension of their domestic duties. By her adamant refusal to abandon her responsibilities, Antigone attempts to preserve the integrity of the *oikos*. On the other hand, by forbidding the rites, Creon undermines the *oikos*, and as a result, the security of the *polis* is threatened. This play reflects the importance of the funerary rites as an integral part

¹¹⁷ The association with funerary rites could also be a result of women's

¹¹⁸ Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece*, 72-73.

¹¹⁹ Sophocles, *Antigone*, trans. Wm. Blake Tyrell and Larry J. Bennett, 46.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 1019.

of maintaining the *oikos*, which is primarily a female responsibility. In addition, the play warns that the destabilization of the *oikos* can lead to drastic consequences for the *polis*.

In summary, the religious duties of women can be linked back to their primary role in Greek society: maintaining the integrity of the *oikos*. All of women's various domestic and ritual duties reflect this idea. The purpose of maintaining the *oikos* is to protect the *polis*. Again, this idea can then be tied back to Athena's general mythical role, which is to protect the Greek state. Greek women used their domestic efforts to protect and strengthen the *oikos*. The *oikos*' stability was tied directly to the stability of the *polis* as a whole, so arguably, Greek women's domestic duties were also tied to protecting the *polis*, albeit indirectly.

Concluding Remarks

Overall, the primary historical duties of Greek women in this time period were centered around the *oikos*. Women were charged with managing the household, bearing children, and weaving, which were all domestic duties that strengthened the *oikos*. Even many of their roles in ritual reflected this purpose. Their involvement in both funerary rites and festivals, such as the *Apatouria*, reflected the importance of securing the stability of the *oikos*.

There few examples of women participating in traditionally male activities during this time period, but the few discussed in this chapter can be justified by their context. Sparta provides an interesting historical example of women possessing traditional masculine qualities, in this case being relative independence and physical strength. However, these transgressions appear to be rationalized by their purpose: to uphold the institutions of the Spartan state. Women displayed independence and physical strength ultimately to be better mothers and wives. This traditional goal perhaps allowed these women to transgress without repercussion. The rituals at

the cult of Artemis in Brauron featured athletic competitions, which were typically restricted for men. However, the ritual context of these activities potentially granted young girls the freedom to be transgressive in this manner. This idea can be tied back to the discussion in Chapter 2 on mortal and immortal femininity. The ritual association with divinity can be used as a basis to justify this transgressive behavior.

In any case, the sociocultural role of women in ancient Greece offers an interesting connection to Athena's divine function. Greek women performed their domestic duties to contribute to the security of the state. Athena uses traditionally unfeminine methods to achieve the same result. While women used their domestic duties to maintain the *oikos*, which indirectly strengthened the *polis*, Athena uses her association with warfare to directly protect the *polis*.¹²¹ Even though Athena is a female deity embodying warfare, a traditionally masculine sphere of influence, she is ultimately using it for a purpose that is at least tangentially connected to a feminine responsibility.

Interestingly, the association of Greek women with funerary rites and death rituals raises a potential connection to divine representations of warfare. For obvious reasons, women were intimately associated with birth and life, and some scholars theorize that this could be the reason that they were also associated with death.¹²² Consequently, the themes of life and death are often tied together, especially across mythologies other than Greek. Goddesses often represent this duality by encompassing both fertility and war in their divinity. This idea does not really apply to Athena, as her divinity distances her from motherhood and fertility, but it is useful when considering the war goddesses of other mythologies, which will be the topic of the next chapter.

¹²¹ Athena's other spheres of influence also all contribute to the same general goal of protecting the Greek state.

¹²² See Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece*, 73; and Luyster, "Symbolic Elements in the Cult of Athena," 163.

Chapter 4: Warlike Goddesses in Other Mythologies

This chapter will explore the roles of warlike women in other mythologies, including Freyja and the Valkyries in Norse myth, Sekhmet and Bastet in Egyptian myth, and Durga in Hindu myth. In Chapter 1, it was shown that Athena's warlike tendencies were used to protect the Greek state and its values. Her motivation to this end likely results from her association to wisdom, as the protection of Greek society's civilized values would have been fundamental to prudence and rational behavior in the ancient Greek mindset.

However, in this chapter, all of the goddesses are closely linked to motherhood and fertility, while also being associated with warfare. As mentioned in the previous chapter, life and death are often connected in mythology. As the scholar Robert Luyster says, "[these goddesses] are ... involved in each other by the very processes of nature; just as life and death are indissolubly joined, so the goddess who dispenses them is one and single."¹²³ It follows that their association to warfare can simply be justified by their tie to motherhood. Perhaps being associated with death, in the form of warfare, is simply a consequence of embodying life, in the form of motherhood or fertility.

This chapter aims to provide a broad overview of the above war goddesses, in order to explore the similarities and differences in their mythological depictions to Athena and to provide additional context for the relationship between war and women in mythology.

Norse Mythology

In Norse mythology, Freyja is a prominent goddess who is associated with both fertility and death. In the surviving texts, Freyja is often referred to as the most renowned goddess in the

¹²³ Luyster, "Symbolic Elements in the Cult of Athena," 163.

Norse pantheon, and there is evidence of her fertility cults being widespread and long-lasting.¹²⁴ Her association with both fertility and warfare plays into the dual life and death model referenced above, which provides a potential justification for her connection to war.

Freyja is primarily associated with sex and fertility. She is often depicted as sexually promiscuous, which plays a role in many of her myths.¹²⁵ For instance, in order to obtain the Necklace of Brisings, which is one of her symbols of fertility, Freyja agreed to spend the night with four different dwarfs.¹²⁶ In addition, Freyja is also heavily associated with childbirth, as indicated in one of the surviving Norse epic poems in which Freyja is invoked by women in labor.¹²⁷ Her tie to fertility is her major sphere of activity.

Freyja is also associated with death and warfare. When Freyja participates in battle, she rides a chariot drawn by cats and claims half of the slain warriors (the other half goes to Odin, the king of the gods).¹²⁸ In another myth regarding the Necklace of Brisings, Odin commands Freyja to stir up war between two human kings, in exchange for the safe return of her necklace.¹²⁹ So, although Freyja's major area of activity appears to be fertility and childbirth, she also has ties to the realms of death and warfare. This duality helps justify her presence in the male-dominated sphere of battle, as she is associated with death as a consequence of her connection to life.

¹²⁴ H. R. Ellis Davidson, *Gods and Myths of the Viking Age* (New York: Bell Publishing Company, 1981), 115.

¹²⁵ Andy Orchard, *Dictionary of Norse Myth and Legend* (London: Wellington House, 1997), 48.

¹²⁶ Kevin Crossley-Holland, *The Norse Myths* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), xxx.

¹²⁷ Davidson, *Gods and Myths of the Viking Age*, 111.

¹²⁸ Crossley-Holland, *The Norse Myths*, xxx; Georges Dumézil, *Gods of the Ancient Northmen* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 73-74; Orchard, *Dictionary of Norse Myth and Legend*, 48.

¹²⁹ Crossley-Holland, *The Norse Myths*, 69.

In addition to Freyja, the Valkyries are another example of women associated with war in Norse myth. In epic poetry, the Valkyries often appear armed and ride on horses that can pass swiftly over both land and sea.¹³⁰ They are a group of female spirits who, on Odin's command, lead fallen warriors to Valhalla, the hall of the slain.¹³¹ Valhalla is one of Odin's realms, and offers feasting and hospitality to those fallen in war. The deceased warriors would spend the day in endless, glorious battle, and the night feasting at Valhalla. The Valkyries, after initially guiding them to the hall, would remain and serve the warriors by bringing them food and drink.¹³² Their roles as guiding forces parallel some aspects of Athena's character in myth, specifically her role to guide various Greek heroes in their heroic endeavors. This is unsurprising, given that one of the primary feminine roles in antiquity is to be a guide and caretaker to men.

In addition, the Valkyries could sway the course of battle, as those who received their favor would emerge victorious. For instance, the Valkyries aided the warrior Balder in battle, and were thought to have granted him victory.¹³³ However, the Valkyries were simply a mouthpiece for Odin's commands, as they would give victory according to his will, rather than their own.¹³⁴ As a result, even though the Valkyries operated in the realm of war, they were ultimately subservient to the king of the gods himself. This theme is present in the myths of other warlike goddesses, namely Athena. As discussed in Chapter 1, Athena's authority derives in part from her father, the king of the Greek gods. Her transgressive nature and relatively powerful status in Greek myth can potentially be justified through her connection to her father's power. In

¹³⁰ Davidson, *Gods and Myths of the Viking Age*, 61.

¹³¹ Orchard, *Dictionary of Norse Myth and Legend*, 172; Dumézil, *Gods of the Ancient Northmen*, 29.

¹³² Davidson, *Gods and Myths of the Viking Age*, 28.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 184.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 61.

other words, divine female figures were able to participate in the male-dominated realm of warfare, but often only in the service of a higher-ranking male god.

Interestingly, the Valkyries were also tied to female priestesses, who were thought to actually become Valkyries after death. These priestesses were often part of a cult of the Norse god of war, and would oversee the sacrifices of men in his name.¹³⁵ It seems that these priestesses were associated with the Valkyries because both dealt with death and its aftermath in some fashion, along with a heavy association to warfare.

In conclusion, the Norse female figures of war have slightly different, but ultimately traditional, justifications for their martial abilities. In the case of Freyja, her association with death and battle likely stems from her connection to life and fertility. As discussed in previous chapters, Athena's warlike character is never used to directly challenge the social norms of gendered societies. Perhaps Freyja's divinity functions in a similar manner, as her warlike character ultimately comes from a traditionally feminine source: fertility. Freyja does not challenge tradition; instead, she embodies it. On the other hand, the Valkyries operate in the realm of warfare under the command of Odin himself. They perform ultimately servile, if military, roles in order to carry out the will of the king of the Norse gods. Consequently, any martial power they have can be justified both by their servile role and their association with Odin. There is an important similarity to Athena in this particular justification. As discussed in Chapter 1, a potential reason for Athena's martial authority is the association with her father Zeus. Her power is justified, because it ultimately stems from his own.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 71.

Egyptian Mythology

In Egyptian mythology, there are multiple goddesses of war, but this section will focus primarily on Sekhmet and her more peaceful counterpart, Bastet. These two goddesses represent warfare and fertility, respectively, and their ties to each other are another version of the life and death model, in which a connection to warfare is justified by an association to the traditionally feminine realm of fertility and childbirth.

Sekhmet's name means "powerful," and she is often depicted as a woman bearing the head of a lion. On rare occasions, she even appears as a full lioness. Sekhmet is heavily associated with warfare and aggression, and is often seen to be a violent force. She is also associated with plague and sickness. However, despite her aggressive tendencies, Sekhmet could also serve as a protective force. For instance, Egyptians would pray to her for protection from disease, even using priests of Sekhmet to help cure illness. Egyptian people also wore amulets of Sekhmet to protect them from ghosts and demons, who were thought to cause disease. In addition, Sekhmet served as a protector to the Egyptian king, as she would breathe fire at his enemies and even accompany him during battle.¹³⁶ Sekhmet's role as a protective force draws an interesting parallel back to Athena, as one of her prominent spheres of activity is as the protector of the city and of heroes.

In addition, Sekhmet's violence and aggression often serves a purpose in the myths of other goddesses, namely Isis, the goddess of the throne, and Hathor, the goddess of love.¹³⁷ During her aggressive campaign against another god, Seth, Isis transforms into Sekhmet and uses

¹³⁶ Garry J. Shaw, *The Egyptian Myths: A Guide to the Ancient Gods and Legends* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2014), 26, 161.

¹³⁷ Siegfried Morenz, *Egyptian Religion*, trans. Ann E. Keep (London Methuen & Co Ltd, 1973), 262-263.

the war goddess' flame to assist her.¹³⁸ In addition, at one point in the Egyptian mythological canon, Ra, the sun-god, discovers that humans were plotting against him. In order to combat this threat, he sends Hathor to kill them. As she began to slaughter them, Hathor embodied the form of Sekhmet, due to the violence of her act.¹³⁹

However, the protective aspect of Sekhmet is more often associated with her peaceful counterpart, Bastet. Bastet is also depicted as a lioness, or as a woman with the head of a cat. She is associated with motherhood and fertility, and provided protection to pregnant women and to the deceased.¹⁴⁰ The two goddesses were closely connected to each other, both in myth and in ritual. A Philæ text refers to the duality by saying, “kindly is she as Bast, terrible is she as Sekhmet.”¹⁴¹ For instance, during the hot Egyptian summers, the Nile River would be at its lowest and plague would spread through the surrounding areas. If people died as a result of these plagues, they were thought to have been shot by the Seven Arrows of Sekhmet. Ritual practices were used to calm Sekhmet's aggression and turn her into her friendlier counterpart, Bastet.¹⁴²

The duality between Sekhmet and Bastet can also be reflected in the duality between life and death. Sekhmet's warlike tendencies are connected to and balanced by Bastet's association with life and motherhood. This idea fits well into the theory that death (and by extension, war) is justified in a female deity by her concurrent association with life (in the form of fertility or motherhood). This idea is present in the mythological depictions of other war goddesses in this section, providing further support for this reoccurring theme in myth.

¹³⁸ Shaw, *The Egyptian Myths*, 91-92.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 57-59.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁴¹ Donald A. Mackenzie, *Egyptian Myths and Legends* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1978), xxxviii.

¹⁴² Shaw, *The Egyptian Myths*, 150.

In addition, the goddesses Nekhbet and Wadjet (or Edjo) provide another interesting example of female deities acting as a protective force. Both of these goddesses are referred to as protectresses of the Egyptian king. Nekhbet is associated with the Upper Egypt region and is depicted as a vulture wearing a white crown, and Wadjet comes from the Lower Egypt region and is depicted as a snake wearing a red crown.¹⁴³ As discussed earlier, Athena's warlike character is often used in various protective roles, either as the protector of heroes or as the protector of the city. It seems as if divine goddesses often use any martial abilities to protect those who deserve it, such as kings or male heroes. This protective mindset can be interpreted as a means of aligning their support and ability to venerable male figures, just as women in antiquity were expected to support and uphold their men.

Despite the obvious differences, there are broad similarities between Athena's character and that of these Egyptian goddesses. Namely, both of their mythologies feature them in protective roles. Athena protects cities and heroes, while Sekhmet protects against disease and both Nekhbet and Wadjet protect the king. As mentioned previously, this protective role aligns them and their power behind a male figure. Their masculine warlike abilities are still ultimately used to support and bolster a worthy man. By choosing to use their warlike abilities in this manner, these goddesses do not seem to be overtly challenging the strict social divide between acceptable male and female roles. Instead, they fit into supportive and ultimately feminine roles, despite the inherently transgressive nature of their association to warfare.

¹⁴³ Upper Egypt is located south along the Nile river, closer to Nubia. Royalty from this region were often depicted wearing a white crown. Lower Egypt is located north along the Nile river, around the delta region. The royalty from this region was depicted wearing a red crown. See Shaw, *The Egyptian Myths*, 134; and Morenz, *Egyptian Religion*, 261-266.

Hindu Mythology

In Hindu mythology, there are many female goddesses, all of whom are connected to each other. This section will focus on Durga, who is a warlike manifestation of the divine female deity, Devi. Devi can be considered a general term for all female goddesses throughout Hindu scripture and the long history of Hindu religious practice. There are countless manifestations of Devi, including Durga, the Hindu goddess of war.¹⁴⁴

Durga is most often depicted with ten arms, each holding a weapon or symbol of her divinity. She rides a tiger or a lion, and is often shown engaged in battle with the demon, Mashisa.¹⁴⁵ She is a primordial force of the Hindu cosmogony, and represents both creative and destructive forces. This duality is often represented with her associations to motherhood and battle, respectively.¹⁴⁶ Durga's worship (or the Durga puja) is heavily connected to her role as the "Mother of the Universe," which in turn, is tied to her roles as both the Creator and the Destructor. In the Hindu mindset, there cannot be one without the other, as something must be destroyed to create anew.¹⁴⁷ Durga's ties to both creation and destruction reflect the theme of life and death mentioned throughout this chapter. Her destructive ability can be justified through its connection to creation, similar to the other war goddesses mentioned in this section.

Her role in the Sanskrit epic *The Mahabharata* shows some interesting parallels to Athena's role in *The Odyssey*. In general, both epics feature similar, broad story arcs. The heroes are forced to live through a long exile, only to return and regain their thrones in a glorious and

¹⁴⁴ George M. Williams, *Handbook of Hindu Mythology* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2003), 114-116.

¹⁴⁵ Dulal Chaudhuri, *Goddess Durgā: The Great Mother* (Calcutta: Mrimol Publishers, 1984), 15; Williams, *Handbook of Hindu Mythology*, 122-124.

¹⁴⁶ Chaudhuri, *Goddess Durgā: The Great Mother*, 16.

¹⁴⁷ Pranab Bandyopadhyay, *Mother Goddess Durga* (Calcutta: United Writers, 1993), 21; Abhijit Dutta, *Mother Durga, An Icon of Community and Culture* (Calcutta: Readers Service, 2003), 3.

violent battle. While Durga's role in *The Mahabharata* is relatively minor, there are distinct similarities to a particular part of Athena's involvement in *The Odyssey*. One of the heroes of the Sanskrit epic, Yudhisthira, meets with Durga at the end of his exile after praying for success in the upcoming battle. Durga arrives and promises her favor on the battlefield, as well as granting him and his brothers the ability to not be recognized by their foes. This scene is very similar to one in *The Odyssey*, where Odysseus essentially asks the same of Athena.¹⁴⁸ Both war goddesses act as guiding forces to the male heroes of their respective epics. The men pray to them for the boon of victory, which is granted due to their heroic natures.

However, there are also notable differences between Durga and Athena, especially in the aforementioned epics. Namely, Durga retains her femininity throughout *The Mahabharata*, while Athena presents a more androgynous appearance in *The Odyssey*.¹⁴⁹ When Athena first appears to Odysseus on Ithaca, she is disguised as a male shepherd. There is no mistaking that Athena is actually female, but her willingness to transgress into both male forms and male-dominated activities is arguably more overt than the other war goddesses in this section, including Durga. In fact, Athena's brief disguise actually parallels the role of the male god Dharma in *The Mahabharata*, who appears incognito to Yudhisthira when testing his worthiness.¹⁵⁰ In this respect, Athena's role is parallel to the more prominent role of a male Hindu god, rather than that of Durga. In general, Athena also intervenes more in *The Odyssey* than Durga does in *The Mahabharata*. Durga plays a relatively minor role in the epic, as she only appears in a few brief scenes. Athena's more visible role in *The Odyssey* actually mirrors the interventions of male

¹⁴⁸ Nick Allen, "Athena and Durgā: Warrior Goddesses in Greek and Sanskrit Epic," in *Athena in the Classical World*, ed. Susan Deacy and Alexandra Villing (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2001), 367-382.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 379-381.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 380.

Hindu gods in *The Mahabharata*, such as Dharma.¹⁵¹ Athena's relatively more active presence in the Greek epic could be a reflection of her more overtly transgressive nature. Her association with masculinity, and concurrent distance from femininity, might confer a greater importance on her role in myth, and as a result, her role in the Greek epics.

Concluding Remarks

Though it is difficult to draw a broad conclusion that neatly encompasses justifications for all of these goddesses' associations with warfare, there are general themes that provide interesting ideas about the mythical relationship between war and women.

The common themes of guidance and protection are present both in Athena's myths and those of the war goddesses in this chapter. Athena uses war to support and protect the interests of men, and by extension, the interests of the patriarchal society that worshipped her. The Valkyries and Durga also exhibited a similar role in guiding heroes, while the Egyptian war goddesses protected their kings.

Notably, most of the goddesses discussed in this chapter have overt connections to both life and death. This theme is present across these disparate regions and cultures, which suggests the relative importance of this particular idea in antiquity. If a connection to death is rationalized through a concurrent connection to life, then it follows that a goddess can embody warfare as a consequence to her role as mother. It seems as if these goddesses do not challenge the social order; rather, they fit neatly into it, despite the inherently transgressive nature of practicing warfare.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 382.

Conclusion

Though it is difficult to draw a broad, overarching theory for the sociocultural justification of worshipping war as a goddess, there are reoccurring themes that may provide a little insight into the values of these gendered societies.

Through the course of this analysis, the most apparent theme is that of maintaining tradition. Athena never uses war to outright challenge the societal divisions that prevent women from similarly taking up weapons and armor. Instead, every aspect of Athena's divinity points toward strengthening the Greek state and its traditional values. Though transgressive, Athena's warrior character ultimately functions within the purview of the gendered society that worshipped her, albeit with the additional freedom granted to her by her immortality. Divinity provides distance from society and its restrictive values, and as a result, freedom to transgress the boundaries between acceptable masculine and feminine roles. Greek women, though unable to be openly transgressive, still served a similar function in society. They contributed to the stability and security of the Greek state by attending properly to their domestic duties. Though Athena utilized the freedom of divinity to be transgressive (more specifically, to be warlike), both Athena and Greek women of the time period ultimately worked toward a unified purpose: to strengthen Greek society and maintain its traditions.

The war goddesses of other mythologies are characterized much differently in their respective myths, but are still connected to the traditional idea of femininity. It is tempting to conclude that an association to warfare is ultimately grown from a more traditional association with motherhood. However, Athena herself is a notable outlier to this general theme. Neither motherhood nor fertility feature prominently in her myths or in her worship. Even so, it is still interesting to observe that this duality was held in common by cultures distanced both by time

and space. It is also notable that Athena and these goddesses shared other themes relating to their association with warfare. War is used by these goddesses to guide and protect men in their endeavors. It is also used as an extension of the power of a more dominant male deity. In either case, warfare is used by divine female figures in service and support of men. It is again interesting to note that these themes transcend the boundaries created by the distance of these cultures from one another.

This thesis has a broad scope, as it aims to cover a wide variety of topics and themes. Consequently, many generalizations were made of complex ideas. For instance, for the purposes of clarity, many conflicting versions of the referenced myths were not addressed.¹⁵² Women in mythology are often more complex than they seem, as the worship of these divine figures varied depending on both the region and the time period. To accommodate the broad scope of this thesis, many generalizations had to be made, and as a result, some of the nuances of these goddesses may have been lost.

This thesis could be expanded with further research into the details of actual female warriors in ancient history, namely the Scythian women, who are thought to be the historical inspiration behind the myth of the Amazons. This information was not included in this thesis, as the Scythians were not Greek or mythical, but would potentially be useful to further explore the relationship between war and women in antiquity. It would also be useful to consider how the roles of Greek women differed from those of women in other ancient societies that worshipped war goddesses. Further research into this topic could potentially provide even more sociocultural connections between actual historical women and their goddesses.

¹⁵² For instance, there is a version of myth in which Athena actually leads the Amazons in battle.

The underlying theme of women participating in warfare is heavily connected to the idea of transgressive femininity, which refers to women who operate in male-dominated spheres of activity. To explore this idea, it would be useful to include further research into other mythological women who cross over into male-dominated realms other than warfare, such as hunting or leadership.

The paradox of depicting war as a woman is still difficult to explain. There is no neat conclusion that can be drawn, as myth is complex and antiquity is often obscured by both time and distance. The near global prevalence of war goddesses is not insignificant, especially considering the commonalities in their myth and worship. Perhaps the answer lies beyond surviving history and myth. It might be found in the workings of the human psyche or in the discovery of a long-dead primordial goddess that gave rise to the known war goddesses. In any case, the question remains as to what led us to imagine women as warriors in a time that did not allow them to be.

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Biography

Anjali Ramachandran enrolled at UT Austin in 2015 as a Plan II Honors and Biochemistry double major. She has been fascinated with ancient history and mythology her entire life, as well as with the sciences. She spent her time at UT in her research lab studying neural development, tutoring undergraduate science courses, and pursuing an English minor. She plans to attend medical school in 2021, after her upcoming gap year.