

Analysing the Relationship between the Crescent Shaped Shield and the Amazons

Ayşe F. Erol
Department of Archaeology
Gazi University
Ankara, Turkey
aferol@gazi.edu.tr

Among the weapon-illustrated reliefs widely spread throughout the triple-gated city of Pisidian Antioch, an eagle-headed crescent-shaped shield is remarkable. Classical sources refer to the crescent-shaped shields as pelta and also associate them with the Amazons. The fact that the earliest known example of this material is depicted with the Amazons on black-figured vase illustrations has directed us to conclude that the origin of the shield must be associated with the Amazons. The shield having a crescent shape, the Amazons' close relationship with the Mother Goddess and crescent symbols being a part of these goddesses' iconography all seem to reinforce such a proposition. Accordingly, the Amazons, their related goddesses and the crescent form itself are the subject of inquiry for this article.

The triple-gated city of Pisidian Antioch, which is dated to 129 BC by virtue of the inscription it bears (Mitchell-Waelkens 1998: 99), exhibits many weapon-illustrated reliefs widely spread throughout the entire gate. Among them are well-preserved reliefs of swords, cuirasses and shields.



Figure 1

One significant example among them is a crescent shaped eagle-headed shield that is suggested to belong to the middle arch of the gate (Robinson 1926: 55) (Figure 1).

The aim of this article is to point out the origin of this shield type. The fact that no archaeological material identical to this particular type of shield has been obtained so far, has motivated us to conduct the analysis within the framework of Greco-Roman materials that consists of vase paintings, sculptures and reliefs and also descriptions in classical sources. It is in our intention to present some conclusions about the origin of this shield that is worthy of inquiry by virtue of its interesting shape.

Classical sources (Xenophon *Anabasis* 7.4.17; Thucydides 2. 29) which refer to the crescent-shaped shields as “pelta”, also mention the latter with the Amazons (Plutarch *Bioi Paralleloi (Pompeius)* 35; Pausanias *Description of Greece* I. 41. 7; Plinius *Naturalis Historia* 3. 43; Arrianos *Anabasis*, VII, 13, 2-6). The fact that the earliest known example of this material is depicted with the Amazons on black-figured vase illustrations (Bothmer 1957: plate 40/2) has directed us to conclude that the origin of the shield can be associated with the Amazons.

The disposition of the article is as follows: first, we present the material that establishes the relation between this significant shield type with the Amazons. Next, by placing emphasis on the Amazons’ relations with goddesses such as Cybele and Artemis, the connection between these goddesses’ iconography and the structural shape of the shield will be presented. Setting aside classical sources, if current archaeological evidence is taken into account, the existence of the Amazons does not go beyond mere reliefs, sculptures or illustrations on vases. However, it is not within the aims or intentions of this study to either prove or refute the actual existence of the Amazons. Rather, this article is an attempt to investigate and explain why this kind of shield has been associated with the Amazons.

Describing the shield

The shield called as “pelte” in Greek and “pelta” in Latin was crescent shaped and looked like the new moon (Webber 2003: 540). The Pisidian Antioch example, in turn, is again crescent-shaped in its main body, but it differs from the original pelta with only its eagle-headed rim ends. This type of shield has generally consisted principally of a frame of wood or wickerwork covered with leather, without the metallic rim

called an *antyx* (Xenophon *Anabasis*.2.1.16; Warry 1980: 50-51, 61). Some sources mention bronze or even gold as materials used in their construction (Best 1969: 3). As it can be discerned from the illustrations, the pelta was usually carried with an arm-strap or suspended on the back using a back strap. An illustration depicted on a panel from Aphrodisias Agora Gate (Erim 1981: plate.32) (Fig 2) and a depiction of an Amazonomachie scene on the shield of Athena Parthenos from a Roman copy of its Greek bronze original belonging to Pheidias (Ridgway 1984: fig. 10; Harrison 1966: plate. 37/a) depict an Amazon with her pelta carried with an arm-strap (Fig 3).



Figure 2



Figure 3

The Thracian light cavalry too are sometimes shown with a pelta strapped to their back (Webber 2003: fig 1).¹ Xenophon (Xenophon *Anabasis* 7.4.17) describes a Thracian whose suspended pelta was caught between the stakes of a fence while he was trying to clamber over. Much later than the black-figured vases on which this crescent-shaped shield was figured with the Amazons, it is known to have been used in the Athenian army, in the 4th century BC, by a light infantry class called as the *peltastai*, which was based on the Thracian warriors' example (Akarca 1987: 100). By virtue of being light

¹See C. Webber, *Odryian Cavalry Arms, Equipment, and Tactics*, see.: L. Nikolova (ed.), *Early Symbolic Systems for Communication In Southeast Europe* (2003) , 540, fig. 1. On a red-figured pelike that is dated to the 4th century BC and obtained from Sozopol, a Thracian warrior is depicted with his crescent-shaped shield hung on his back. However, the Thracian example is still crescent-shaped but it partially differs from our material in structural terms since it does not have the specific features on the center. For another example of the crescent-shield, see., Y. Boysal, *Klasik Devir heykeltıraşlığı*, (1978, 28, plate 25). Dated to the mid-5th century BC and found in Taşoz Island, a grave built for a hero bears some reliefs that include a shield which is crescent in shape. Yet again, this example does not possess the central features either.

and easy to carry, this significant shield type was preferred by the light infantry, especially in wars fought over mountainous areas, in order for it to generate an advantage of maneuver (Akarca 1987: 100; Xenophon. *Anabasis* I.II.16). On some vase paintings in the red-figured technique the Arimaspians are depicted fighting a griffon in order to obtain the sacred gold of the Scthyians (Herodotos, III. 116, IV.13). Here too, the Arimaspians carry a crescent-shaped shield (McPhee 2000: 454/A2).² However, the crescent shape is more rounded, the central part which can be labeled as the grip is not present and the edges are not curved, unlike the examples that have been associated with the Amazons. Therefore, chronologically the earliest and structurally the closest example to the Pisidian Antioch shield are those whose origin is traced back to the Amazons.

Pelta on Reliefs and Vase Paintings

While Homer labels the Amazons as “those fighting like men” (Homeros *Iliada* III. 184-90), and “women-men” (Homeros *Iliada*. VI. 186), Herodotos refers to them as ancestors of the Sauromatian people whose women went to war along with their men (Herodotos IV.116). Plutarch mentions Romans finding Amazonian pelta and Amazonian corded boots on the battlefield after fighting Caucasian tribes dwelling in the mountains (Plutarch *Bioi Paralleloi Pompeius* 35). Nevertheless, no supportive archaeological material besides these descriptions has been obtained so far.



Figure 4



Figure 5

Greek-Amazon fighting scenes have been a popular scene

²For the battle scene between the Arimaspians and the Griffons, which is depicted on a bell-shaped krater designed in red-figured technique from Corinth, dated to the 4th century BC, see: I. McPhee, “Falaieff bell-kraters from ancient Corinth,” *Hesperia* 69, 2000, 454/ A2.

in Greek vase painting and sculpture. Some Attic black-figured vases bear Amazon illustrations where they are shown with their crescent-shaped shields. In the examples shown, the Amazons are illustrated with this crescent-shield (Figs 4-5).



Figure 6



Figure 7

In sculpture, we find the Amazon with her crescent-shaped shield just like the one on Pisidian Antioch's city gate, but without the eagle-headed rims. The earliest examples of that can be found in the Amazonomachy scene on the western metopes of the Parthenon (Bommer 1967: plate 23) and the shield illustrations in the Amazonomachy scenes placed on Trysa Heroon (Oberleitner 1994: plate 84-87). Among material from the Hellenistic period, the Amazons are depicted with their crescent-shaped shields in Amazonomachy scenes of friezes that were obtained from the temple of Artemis in Magnesia ad Maeandrum (Yaylalı 1976: plate 6) (Fig 6).



Figure 8

Another example is that known

as Amazons' war equipment: a crescent-shaped shield, a double-headed ax and a bow are illustrated on a frieze on the *bouleuterion* of Miletos (Wiegand-Knacfuss 1908: plate 15) (Fig 7).

The affection for Greek art led the way for the Roman artisans to enthusiastically copy many Greek themes into the Roman pieces.

The Amazon Mattei which belongs to a Roman copy of a Greek bronze original of Pheidias and is today in the Vatican Museum displays an excellent example of the crescent-shaped shield without the eagle-headed rim ends (Richter 1951: plate 136 - plate 58) (Fig 8). Next to the Amazon sculpture we find again the crescent-shaped shield attributed to the Amazons and the ax type that is characterized as part of Amazon weaponry.

Greek-Amazon fighting scenes are one of the most popular themes to be copied on many structures in the Central Roman Empire, as well as in Rome's eastern or western provinces. An example of them is presented in Fig 9.

Moreover, belonging to the Roman period, on friezes from Hadrian's temple at Ephesus (Bol 1998, plate 151/ b) and on a sarcophagus



Figure 9

from Aizonai (Türktüzün 1991: plate 10), Amazons are depicted with their crescent-shaped shield. The same type of shield with eagle-headed rim ends can be observed with the depiction of a kneeling Amazon on the bust pedestal of Emperor Commodus (Wheeler 2004: plate 151)³ (Fig 10). Another example from the Roman period can be found on the Termessos theatre's stage building (Lanckoronski 1892: 96, plate 53) where there were weapon illustrations placed on various buildings in order for the cities to show off their defensive capabilities. Aside from these examples are coins of the Roman empire, the eponyms of many cities of Asia Minor are represented as Amazons, holding a spear, a double ax and a pelta (Waites 1923: 31; Klügmann 1870: 545).

Now that we have seen how this particular type of shield has been depicted with the Amazons on both reliefs and vase illustrations, it would be logical to proceed with explaining why the Amazons must have used this significant shield type. The next section is intended for that purpose.

The relation between Mother Goddess and the Amazonian Shield

According to ancient sources, the Amazon deities comprised of Artemis, Ares and Cybele. Diodorus Siculus recorded that splendid festivals were held both to Ares and to Artemis and that the Amazons were regarded as daughters of Ares (Diodoros Sicilus, *Bibliotheka Historika* II. 46 2-6). Pausanias records that there was a statue of Artemis in Messenia bearing shield and spear (Pausanias *Description of Greece* 4.13,1). He also

³Here, Commodus, just like depictions of the Greek Heracles or Roman Hercules, is wearing a lion-skin and the Amazon sitting next to him in the kneeling position is shown with the crescent-shaped pelta. This shield with its eagle-headed rim ends is identical to the shield illustration from Pisidian Antioch.

holds that Artemis Agrotera was not only worshipped as a goddess of the hunt, but she was also accepted as a war-goddess since Athenians sacrificed five hundred goats on her behalf on the anniversary of the battle of Marathon (Paris 1912: 147).



Figure 10

In history, deities have been associated with animals across many cultures. It is also known that moon deities were depicted as bulls and were attributed the name of Taurine (Durukan 2006: 283-89). There is a close connection between Tauris Artemis and Artemis as the Moon Goddess. Diodoros Sicilus mentions the Amazons as worshipping Artemis Tauropolos (Diodoros Sicilus *Bibliotheka Historika*, II. 46). The latter is the moon goddess which is Artemis's cult in the Crimea in southern Russia, and who corresponds to Cybele and

to her native Capadocian version Ma.⁴ Two horns around her head, which form the shape of a crescent, are illustrated in the representations of Artemis Tauropolos's.⁵ Such a depiction relates her to the Moon Goddess (Decharme 1884: 144). Moreover, Euripides refers to Artemis as Selanaia, meaning "in moon form," or related to the moon (Euripides *Phoinissai* 176). In Attica, Artemis takes the name "Mounikhia" that means "the one who makes things be seen only in the night" (Çelgin 1986: 26). That translation without any doubt reminds us of the moon.

In Amazonian society, the cult of Cybele occupies a significant place (Diodoros Sicilus *Bibliotheka Historika* III.55). Ancient sources tell us that in Komana, which was the sacred center of Cybele, she was presented as a war goddess with a thunder-bolt, a mace and a double-ax (Erhat 2005: 184; Schwenn 1922: 2251). The Greeks equated her with Enyo⁶ who was inferior to and in the service of Ares the war god, while the Romans suggested Bellona the war goddess as her equivalent (Erhat 2005: 184). With this quality of hers, the Mother Goddess cult relates to the Amazons while they serve to her. In Apollonius (Apollonius *Argonautica* 2. 1172-1177), it is stated that the Amazons held a religious ceremony around a sacred black stone, like the one in the Cybele cult, which confirms that the Amazons worshipped Cybele. Diodorus, in turn (Diodoros Sicilus *Bibliotheka Historika* III.55), mentions altars being built and sacrifices being made in the name of the Mother Goddess. In addition, in the 5th century BC the cult of Cybele was placed in the Athenian *bouleterion* (Vermaseren 1977: 32-33), which suggests her being the protector goddess of the city (Lucker 2005: 17). Furthermore, the fact that a group of sculptures, known as the Cybele of Bogazkoy belonging to the 6th century BC, stood in front of the city gate points to Cybele's specialty as a city protector. By virtue of being the city-protector, the Romans brought her cult to their cities in order to receive protection and shelter from the disasters of the war with Hannibal (Çapar 1979: 197). The goddess in her Roman examples is illustrated as sitting on a

⁴Strabo (12.2.3) provides us with different localities mentioning the image of the Taurian goddess. According to him, Orestes and Iphigenia established her cult not only at Halai (9.1.22) but also at Komana and Hierapolis-Kastabala.

⁵For Artemis Tauropolos see Gruppe, O., *Griechische Mythologie und Religionsgeschichte*, München, 1906: 325

⁶Strabo mentions (12. 2. 3) a temple dedicated to Enyo, which is called as Ma in Komana, where he argues both female and male servants existed.

throne with her crown as a fortified city on her head while lions accompany her.

War equipment, such as quivers and arrowheads, were obtained from the excavations of female graves, dating to the end of the 6th century BC/beginning of the 5th century BC from the Middle Don region of southern Russia (Yatzenko 1959: 51). This material is important since it seems to confirm Herodotos's references to female warriors in this region (Herodotos IV. 116). Moreover, among the findings in the grave, a bronze mirror grip bears an illustration of Cybele (Yatzenko 1959: 51). Besides the statements in the ancient sources, the fact that similar material has been obtained from other graves of the same region (Guliaev 2003: 122-123) also seems to substantiate the theory of the Russian historian Rostovtzeff that wherever there was a Mother Goddess cult, the Amazons were localized there (Rostovtzeff 1918: 81).

The fact that ancient sources refer to the Amazons as in the service of the Mother Goddess and that the latter possesses warrior-like and city-protector features in some cults, can both be regarded as supportive evidences to her close relationship with the Amazons. The double ax, which has been considered an Amazonian weapon, has come to be illustrated with the Mother Goddess motifs in some cultures.⁷ This ax is found to represent different things: while it might serve as a symbol of the Mother Goddess connected with a cult of fertility, it was also used to point to the storm-god who made it to rain, to amplify the soil's abundance and to create the lightning (Waites 1923: 25-56; Deedes 1935: 221). The fact that the god on some coins is represented with lightning and a javelin, whereas he generally carries an ax and a javelin is further proof to the close connection between the ax and lightning (Montelius 1910: 62, plate. 2, fig. 5). On one side of a coin acquired from Tenedos, there exists a double ax whereas on its other side, the heads of a man and of a woman are drawn jointly. This, in turn, is significant in terms of showing the double-ax as representing the unity of the female and the male principles in the sense that Mother Goddess as the supreme source of life unites in herself the male and the female elements, and such a combination finds appropriate expression in the double-ax (Waites 1923: 33, plate 2; Deedes

⁷For the Mother Goddess depicted with a double-ax, please refer to: M. Waites., "The Deities of Sacred Axe" *AJA* 27.1, 1923, 27, Plate 1

1935: fig 15-16). The double ax's form symbolized the union in her of male and female elements. Consequently, it might well be discerned that the Mother Goddess motif incorporates not only the feminine nature, but also the male one. The same duality can be reflected to the Amazons who were called the "women men" by Herodotos and who were illustrated with double-axes.

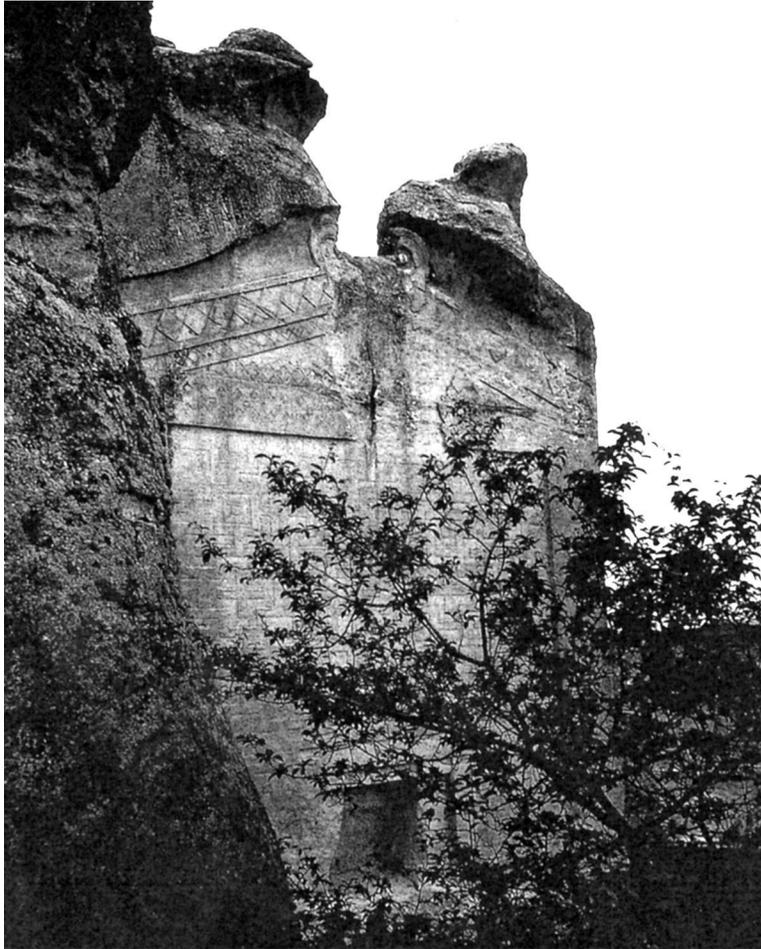


Figure 11

The bull, which has been regarded as a creative power and a symbol of fertility, was often associated with the moon.



Figure 12

The latter was related to the Mother Goddess iconography across many cultures that existed from the Neolithic to the Roman period (Durukan 2006: 283-295). The material that could support this connection can be observed on several illustrations of the Mother Goddess's iconography, such as that of Artemis or Cybele. The upper part of the rock monuments of the Mother Goddess was crowned

with crescent-shaped *acroters* which further support these relations. (Işık 1999: plate 14) (Fig 11). What is more, Artemis Tauropolos was shown with two horns on her head, forming a crescent (Decharme 1884: 144). The Amazons' being related to goddesses such as Cybele and Artemis, and the fact that the aforementioned goddesses' iconography involved curved horns can lead us to conclude that the crescent form was transmitted to the shield's structural shape. On a stele currently housed in the Bonn Museum, there exists an illustration of Attis and along with it a lion motif which symbolizes the Mother Goddess's eternal sovereignty over nature. What is significant is the figure of a pelta just above Attis, in a way directing the attention to the shield's connection with the Mother Goddess depictions (Seltman 1966: 164, b) (Fig 12).

As mentioned above, goddesses such as Artemis or Cybele, who were related to Amazons, were sometimes displayed as warrior-goddesses or city-protectors. Bearing this in mind, the pelta shield, which is a defensive weapon, could have been designed as a reflection of horns and the crescent-shape which pervades an important part of these

goddesses' iconography. The pelta relief on the stele, just mentioned above, is direct evidence of this relationship.

Even though they are not very numerous, examples of eagle-headed crescent-shaped shields are found within the Roman material, such as on the triple-gated reliefs of Pisidian Antioch, on the stage building of the Termessos theatre and on Emperor Commodos's bust. It is not a characteristic of pre-Roman crescent-shaped shield reliefs to have eagle heads. This shield being found on a Roman building and its being combined with eagle-heads that did not exist in the Greek tradition leads us to conclude that this form of shield was combined with the eagle head because the latter was the power symbol of Jupiter, the chief god of the Roman Pantheon, and the strength of the Empire that was identified with Jupiter (Fawler 1916: 157; Jitta 1938: 52, plate III). Furthermore, the eagle motif was also used in the *aquila* carried by the Roman legions (Fawler 1916: 157), which underlines the point that the shield must have been used as a Roman defensive weapon, which was reinforced and consolidated by the chief god's sacred animal, thus by the latter's strength and might. It is widely known that especially in the Roman period, but also in the Hellenistic times, weapon illustrations were employed to exemplify the military might of the city.⁸ This convention must have been sustained in the triple city-gate of Pisidian Antioch.

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⁸For the buildings on which weapon illustrations are found, see: K.G Lanckoronski, *Städte Pamphyliens und Pisidiens II*, 1892, Plate. 178, E. Petersen, F. von Luschan, *Reisen in Lykien, Milyas und Kibyraties Band:2*, 1889, Figure. 71-72 ;S, Bulgurlu , "Perge Kenti Hellenistik Güney Kapısı ve Evreleri" Unpublished Dissertation, Istanbul Üniversitesi, 1999, 46 ; A.M Mansel , *Side'nin Doğu Şehir Kapısında Bulunan Silah Kabartmaları* "Belleten XXX 1966 , 351-375, Plate. 15; A, Machatschek, M, Schwarz., *Bauforschungen in Selge*, 1981, Figure. 1; S, Mitchell., "1995 Yılı Pisidia Araştırması" 15. Araştırma Sonuçları Toplantısı 1. Cilt , Ankara, 1996, 48 Plate. 1; A.F. Erol, "An Analysis on Illustrations of War Materials on City Gates: Pamphylien, Pisidian and Isaurian Regions", ANODOS 4-5/ 2004-2005 (Studies of Ancient World), Trnava, 2006, 69-76

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