Chapter 3
Amazons in Medieval World Maps

The Ebstorf Map

Two armed queens stand erect beside a building with crenellated walls and a tower, in the vast expanses of Asia (Fig. 3.1). The scene appears on the Ebstorf map, arguably the most famous encyclopedic world map of the Middle Ages, and – at 358 × 356 cm – certainly the largest. Created around 1300, the original was destroyed by fire in 1943. In the replica, the two women, dressed in courtly robes, look attractive and well able to defend themselves. Their arms and armor – helmets, shield, and sword or spear – indicate an unconcealed willingness to fight. Their long tresses and the ample folds of their skirts emphasize feminine features. The accompanying text explains: “Here is the region of the Amazons. These are women who fight like men. They once appointed two beautiful, experienced, and cultivated queens. One was called Marpesia, the other Lampedo. They kill male offspring, but carefully nurture female offspring and train them in warfare. They cauterize their right breast so they can use a bow without injury.”¹

The description of this nation of women, including the rulers, Marpesia and Lampedo, is vivid. These warriors, fighting like men, are reported to be experienced and beautiful, a combination that must have confused medieval Europeans – just as it would have baffled any enemy. The text depicts them as cultivated and elegant, but also ruthless, since they are in the habit of killing their newborn sons and sacrificing their right breasts so they can draw their bows more easily. According to the description, they raise their daughters with care and prepare them for future combat duties.

Evidently the European division of roles between the sexes was exactly reversed in the vast expanses of Asia: military chivalry fell to the women; newborn sons were murdered, and daughters favored in the succession. The two Amazons do not look unfeminine, although masculine attributes partially cover their women’s clothing. Their familiar, courtly demeanor offers an appealing contrast to their knee-length surcoats. If it were not for the militant equipment and the description of their cruel actions, these delicate beauties could be a reference to courtly ways of life.²

Cartographically, the power of these female warriors extends over the whole region. Since Strabo, the Amazons had been thought to have their base in the town of Themiscyra, a well-fortified location on the river Thermodon, or in the Eurasian Caucasus, which is defended by a double moat on the map.\footnote{Die Ebstorfer Weltkarte, ed. Kugler, 1:nos. 23/17.} Not far from here, the leaves of a giant tree are judged by whether they are as large as an Amazon’s shield. The comparison makes these fearless women and their weapons a benchmark for assessing the unknown.
The Ebstorf map is a development of the east-oriented T-O maps, in which a circular ocean surrounds Asia, Europe, and Africa. The three continents, arranged in a 2:1:1 ratio, are separated from one another by bodies of water in the shape of a T, with the Mediterranean as the shaft and the Don and Nile as the crossbar (Fig. 3.2). The three sons of Noah are assigned to the continents: the first-born, Shem, to the largest continent, Asia; the cursed Ham, to Africa; and the youngest, Japheth, to Europe. This interpretative model reflects the primacy of Asia in terms of salvation history: Paradise was assumed to be in the east of Asia, along with the sources of the four rivers of Paradise, the Ganges, Euphrates, Tigris, and Nile. The Christian orientation of the image of the world combines an encyclopedic array of ancient and biblical knowledge with contemporary insights.

The T-O concept was modified as needed, and appeared in all formats from small T-O diagrams to large wall maps. The oval, rectangular, or round Beatus maps of the tenth to thirteenth centuries expanded the east-oriented ecumene by adding a fourth continent in the southern hemisphere. Hemispheric world maps, as found in the Wolfenbüttel manuscript of the *Liber floridus* by Lambert of Saint-Omer (Fig. 3.3), added the other side of the earth. The aim was not to give a true-to-
Fig. 3.2: Schematic T-O map; Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, 2 Inc. c.a. 129. Creative Commons 4.0.
scale representation of the world or an aid to orientation based on real topography, but to illustrate the divine order in its immeasurable abundance.

Such maps not only visualize the world in spatial terms, but also show the history contained in it. This made it possible to position the mythical Amazons in a well-structured world order without permanently fixing their location. The basis for this was knowledge from antiquity, handed down since Herodotus, about a community in which the cultural and social gender order was reversed. Roman historians such as Pomponius Mela conceived of the Amazons as a separate nation. This notion reached Christian Europe by way of Isidore of Seville, who lived from around 560 to 636. Later, reports on east Asia added observations on matriarchy, polygamy, prostitution, and motherhood.

From the eighth century or earlier, cartographers included the land of the fearless female fighters in their designs. An early example is the “Vatican” Isidore map, showing the region of the Amazons to the west of the Caspian Sea and northeast of the Black Sea. These well-armed women are reported to live in Amazonia in northern Asia, near the Caspian Gates. The Beatus map of Saint-Sever (around 1065–1072) also locates the nation of women by the Caspian Sea (Fig. 3.4). Similar illustrations are found in the twelfth-century Lund map, the somewhat later Heidelberg map, and the “Sawley” map, created around 1200. Even the bibli- cally oriented maps in the Hieronymus manuscripts do not omit the female warriors. Until the second half of the thirteenth century, maps placed the Amazons fairly consistently to the northeast of Europe, in Colchis (now Georgia), by the Black Sea or in the Caucasus – this is also confirmed by lettering in the Psalter map in London (after 1262). Here these battle-hardened women rule a frontier zone, where they must face dangerous conflicts with foreign cultures if the occi- dental order is not to fall apart.

4 Herodotus, Histories, 4.111–16.
5 Isidore of Seville, Etymologiae, 9.2.62–65.
6 Vatican City, Bibliotheca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. lat. 6018, fols. 63v–64r; Leonid S. Chekin, Northern Eurasia in Medieval Cartography: Inventory, Text, Translation, and Commentary (Terra- rum Orbis 4) (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006), 128, no. X.1.
7 Berlin, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Theol. lat., f. 149, fol. 27r; Chekin, Northern Eurasia in Medieval Cartography, 52, no. II.8.
8 Heidelberg, Universitätsbibliothek, Salem IX, 39, fol. 1v; Chekin, Northern Eurasia in Medieval Cartography, 119, no. VIII.9.1.
9 Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, Ms. 66.
In cartographic terms, the Amazons personify the edge of Christian-European culture. Their inaccessible land touches the unconquerable Other. Aloof and free of any moralizing impetus, these fearless women inhabit the border zones of knowledge. Here they coalesce with other nations, be it Germanic tribes or Scythians. The spatial proximity to terrifying mythical peoples shows how fears and fantasies merged into one another. It is entirely possible that Gothic women, for example, fought alongside men and proved themselves on the battlefield. Jordanes, a scholar of late antiquity, drew an impressive portrait of female fighters of Gothic descent with Lampedo and Marpesia as their commanders-in-chief.\footnote{Jordanes, \textit{Romana et Getica}, V, 44 u. VII–VIII, 49–57.}
Lampedo, he writes, stayed back to protect their home territory, while Marpesia successfully pushed forward into the Caucasus with her army of women.

On maps, variations on such stories initially appeared as short texts, and then, from about 1250, in pictorial sequences. The first phase includes the Wolfenbüttel copy of the hemispheric world map of Lambert of Saint-Omer, produced around 1180 (Fig. 3.3). The two halves show the ecumene, consisting of three continents and Paradise, and the uninhabitable southern hemisphere. In the inhabited part of the globe, the valiant Amazons assemble at the northwestern border of Asia, which separates it from Europe. To the west of this are the thirty-two kingdoms that Alexander the Great is said to have locked away. These nations of the end times, trapped behind the Caspian Gates, were identified either with the ten lost tribes of Israel, or with Gog and Magog, who – according to the prophecy in the Book of Revelation – would break out on the

---

coming of the Antichrist and lay waste to the earth.\textsuperscript{12} The narrow waterway of the Don separates these ferocious tribes from vulnerable Europe.

\textsuperscript{12} On the Inclusi behind the Caspian Gates, Naomi Reed Kline, \textit{Maps of Medieval Thought: The Hereford Paradigm} (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2001), 184–87; Andrew C. Gow, “Kartenrand,
The encyclopedic maps of the second phase are more nuanced, the integrated images more representational. In the Ebstorf map, the Amazons appear in several places between the early Goths on Scandia and the Ostrogoths in Dacia. A long band of text explains the geographic position: “The Caucasus rises from the Chinese Sea in the east and extends northwards, in an arc, almost as far as Europe. The Amazons, Massagetae, Colchians, and Sards live here.”¹³ The repeated positioning of the Amazons between the Scythians and other peoples of the steppes such as the Sarmatians gives the impression that this nation of female warriors split off from the rest of the Germanic tribes during their long migration from the frozen steppes – and then developed their own mode of existence in the Caucasus. But only the mountain range separates them from the cruel nations who will one day form the armies of the Antichrist (Fig. 3.5).¹⁴

Fig. 3.5: Ebstorf map with Scandia and Gog and Magog as cannibals, around 1300; Die Ebstorfer Weltkarte, ed. Kugler, nos. 8–9, 15–16.

¹³ Die Ebstorfer Weltkarte, ed. Kugler, 1:nos. 3/7. Translation by Dr. Nicola Barfoot of the text originally translated into German.
Fig. 3.6: Psalter map, with semicircular Caucasus and closed Caspian Gates, after 1262; London, British Library, Add. Ms. 28681, fol. 9r. Creative Commons 1.0.
This notion of a threatening presence in the northeast lends a certain drama to almost every world map. On the Hereford map, the descendants of Gog and Magog sit in seclusion on the island of *Terraconta* in the encircling ocean, barbarically devouring the flesh of young men. Even on the small Psalter map in London, the semicircular mountain range of the Caucasus and Taurus is clearly recognizable. The gates erected by Alexander are still closed, and the prison is guarded by the Amazons (Fig. 3.6). So the land of the Amazons was the furthest point separating the self from the Other, the world of the Germanic tribes and Scythians from the sphere of influence of cannibalistic end-time nations.
Fig. 3.7: Hereford map, detail showing the female rulers in India, after 1290; London, Royal Geographical Society, Hereford map. Creative Commons 1.0.
Between Center and Periphery

Cartographically, the Amazons claimed their place at the point of intersection between Christ and Antichrist, between protective ruler of the world and destructive armies. In the world maps of Ebstorf and Hereford, the virtually invincible women are in contact with both the centrally located Jerusalem and the monsters on the periphery. Inside and outside, the maps have great visual expressiveness. In the south of the Psalter map we see creatures with four eyes or six fingers; beings who consume food through pipes or have no tongues; people without ears or noses; cannibals and men with the heads of dogs. The Ebstorf map shows these misshapen creatures in two rows.\(^\text{15}\) The monsters on the Hereford map appear less prominent at first glance. On closer inspection, though, they take up a substantial part of the margins of the earth.\(^\text{16}\) In the complex system of narrative and classification, both Amazons and monsters are clearly part of an overall program, every part of which is related to salvation history.

In such contexts, the counterworlds of European ideals could readily combine with Christian ideas of morality. The Ebstorf map sketches the tribe of Pangea, a community ruled by women in the gold and pearl mountains, south of Paradise.\(^\text{17}\) The Hereford map also positions the female rulers of India at the top, in the east (Fig. 3.7). In early Christian literature, the metaphor of “becoming a man” was accompanied by a moral and spiritual progression towards perfection. While the feminization of a man unmistakably signified a decline, a woman who became masculine could, according to Christian ideas, develop into an exemplary man. The spatial proximity of the reigning women to Paradise implicitly opens up this path to salvation.

Foreign Women, Foreign Customs

The perception of foreign female warriors focused not only on inaccessible worlds, but also on barely comprehensible customs. The Amazons depicted on maps generally display behaviors with masculine connotations, expressed in physical characteristics. The maps in the Polychronicon, a world history by Ranulf Higden (d. 1363), note their vigorous style of fighting and the missing right

\(^{15}\) Die Ebstorfer Weltkarte, ed. Kugler, 1:nos. 21/27/28/34/35/42/49.
\(^{16}\) The Hereford Map: A Transcription and Translation of the Legends with Commentary, ed. Scott D. Westrem (Turnhout: Brepols, 2001), no. 961–73.
\(^{17}\) Die Ebstorfer Weltkarte, ed. Kugler, 1:nos. 5/11.
Fig. 3.8: Catalan Atlas, around 1375; Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Esp. 30. Public Domain.
breast.18 Their neighbors were the hermaphrodites, creatures combining both sexes, who – according to Pliny and Isidore of Seville – were born without a right breast.

Late medieval world maps recount the old stories, but with greater variety. The Catalan Atlas (around 1375) presents the region of women as an isolated island realm on Ceylon, named Illa Jana (Fig. 3.8). Here a long-haired ruler with an oversized sword in her right hand recalls an Amazon queen. She sits majestically on her throne, a golden crown on her head, an imperial orb in her left hand, wearing a richly draped robe in splendid blue and red.19 The Borgia map, produced around 1430 using the niello technique, ranks the Amazons in the northeast among the

18 Mappaemundi, ed. Miller, 3:101: “Amazones sunt femine sine mamillis dextris, per se ipsas [per sagittas?] viriliter militantes.”
Fig. 3.9: World map by Andreas Walsperger, detail showing the Amazons, 1448; Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Pal. lat. 1362 B. Creative Commons 1.0. Facsimile: Weltkarte des Andreas Walsperger, Pal. lat. 1362 B. Explanation by Edmund Pognon, Zurich 1987.
Fig. 3.9 (detail)
famous women, and tells of the brave Penthesilea, who was slain by the Greek Achilles outside Troy. Andreas Walsperger, a Benedictine monk from Salzburg, created a south-oriented world map (1448) in the tradition of the Klosterneuburg school. He places the valiant Amazons – with a short text but no illustration (Fig. 3.9) – midway between Jerusalem and Paradise. Even the critical Camaldolese monk Fra Mauro (around 1459) conscientiously includes the province of the Amazons (Fig. 3.10).

Fig. 3.10: World map by Fra Mauro, detail showing the Amazons, 1459; Venice, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana. Creative Commons 1.0.

By the fifteenth century the Ptolemaic worldview had been discovered and the experiences of travelers to Asia were well-known. Nonetheless, the mythical female warriors remained part of the creation. Furthermore, the Amazon myth merged with stories of women living in segregation on desert islands in the Indian Ocean. Andreas Walsperger, for example, shows the bearded women whose existence was attested by classical and medieval authors, including the archbishop of Hamburg, Adam von Bremen.21 And Ranulf Higden tells us about the women living alone on the legendary Gorgades. The only unexplained aspect was reproduction, and this explanation was supplied by Fra Mauro: his map includes mention of a necessary three-month period of concubinage every year.22

---

22 *Il Mappamondo di Fra Mauro: Una storia*, ed. Piero Falchetta (Rimini: Imago 2013), pl. III, 1, 24: “Queste do’ isole sono habitatte p(er) christiani. In una de le qual çoè in nebila habita le done e in l’altra dita mangla habita li lor homeni, i qual solamente tre mesi de l’ano stano con le done”; ibid., pl. IV, 6, 24: “Circa hi ani del Signor 1420 una naue ouer çoncho de india
Tales such as this reflect a world of matriarchal power and female independence. Another example is the Garamantes in Libya, depicted on the Ebstorf map as lying near the inhabitants of the edge of the earth and the wild animals of Africa. Inspired by Solinus, the map depicts this nation as a matriarchy, in which children revere only their mothers. And the Borgia map shows (in southern Africa, near Abimichabal, the king of the dog-headed men) wild women giving birth to their offspring without husbands. Such an abstruse world violated all civilized norms, and implied a value judgment: outside the Christian world, barbaric customs prevailed.

**Migration to the New World**

Precisely because the Amazons marked the outer limit of possible experience, they were not a static model. Over the centuries, they migrated across the

---


maps, from their original home by the Black Sea to a new home near the nations of the end times in the Caucasus, then to the steppes of Asia close to Paradise, and later to the Amazon in South America. For every step there were historical models: the courageous barbarian women of the Migration Period, the horse-riding Mongol women of the central Asian steppe, and the indigenous women fighting against European conquerors in South America.

The latter appeared on a map by Theodor de Bry, a Calvinist engraver from Frankfurt, in 1599. De Bry explains that the Amazon river is named after these women, who only live with men for one month per year to produce offspring. The sons are then transferred to the men, while the women keep the daughters (Fig. 3.11). This reinvention of old myths was a response to the combative women described by the Dominican friar Gaspar de Carvajal, a participant in the Spanish expedition to the Amazon in 1542. At the same time, cartographers transferred other figures from Asia to the New World, adapting them to different temporal planes, spaces, and requirements. For example, cormorant fishing was moved to Guyana, and the people without heads to the Orinoco.25 Their presence on the maps was guaranteed by literary tradition and the contemporary horizon of experience.

**Conclusion**

In foreign lands, the European gender order seemed to fall apart. There the cartographers could depict the Amazons and their customs in text and image, while combining the perception of female ways of life with the geographic, cultural, and physical experience of foreign places. The traditions and motifs were supplied by ancient and early Christian authorities. The Amazons symbolized contrary worlds: they were both a fascinating ideal and a horrifying curiosity. Admirable qualities such as courage, independence, intelligence, and beauty were contrasted with a lack of civilization, animalistic instincts, and barbaric customs. This was a view of the opposite sex liberated from all conventions. It was only outside Western civilization that women could take on masculine tasks and behaviors without endangering the European gender order.

---
