Mysterious Artemisia belongs to those females, who without being disputed for their sex, their character and their idiosyncrasy, resemble male standards. We shall find her in the last books of Herodotus’ *Histories* and with her dynamic as well as warning role she “indicates” in her own way that human power is limited and when exceeding it, disaster comes close. As queen of Halicarnassus, Herodotus’ native city, she participated in Xerxes’ ambitious campaign against Greece. This fact eliminates any suspicion for information regarding her existence; undoubtedly, the common nativity insures the validity of the historian’s sources, providing him also with the ability to describe crucial moments of her actions, outlining her personality with a mixture of originality and – why not? – exaggeration.

Artemisia, in a strange way, appears to have a voluntary bravery; apart from participating in a mighty force, in which even its leaders are slaves, forced to serve the great Persian king, she possesses – for insignificant reasons – a kind of freedom, and that obviously discriminates her from the others. That freedom to an ally of Xerxes, combined with a remarkable valor, unsuitable to her female nature, makes her a symbol as well as an enigma, and puts her among the limited class of personalities who attracted historians’ interest and attention, so as to name them miracles (thomata).

In addition, a number of contradictions in telling the story reinforce the rarity of that miracle. Herodotus, in describing the preparations of the campaign, although he names only a few selected leaders of Xerxes’ immense army, specifically mentions Artemisia. She represents a characteristic and worthy exception in the historian’s choice; while she participates in the campaign with only 5 ships, she is being given the greatest – after leader Mardonius – part of the historic narrative concerning the Persian side. While, as a mother, she could easily look after her child living in the luxury and the safety of her royal palace, she chooses to risk her life far away from it. While belonging to the Persian side of ambitious conquerors, at the same time she appears to command Greeks, leading them against other Greeks. So, how could this oddity be justified?

Probably the answer is hiding in the personality of that figure. Artemisia appears to have characteristics which are in harmony but simultaneously opposed to those of the Persians, and this changeability affects her relationship with the Greek adversaries. As an Asian ruler – intruder who ends up as Xerxes’ children’s caretaker, she identifies herself with the barbarians’ aristocracy. In front of the surprised eyes of the Greeks she appears as the embodiment of a reversed world, where women become men.

This incompatible, “masculine” part of her character prevails in her herodotean portrait and it is also certain that, if Herodotus was aware of female spicy details - as for example hot stories of seduction, passion or even erotic retaliation - he would have no hesitation

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1 Perhaps Herodotus was proud of his compatriot’s achievements, although he had good reasons to dislike her family, if we consider that the queen of Caria was grandmother of tyrant Lygdamis. Herodotus was exiled to Samos by Lygdamis, but later he succeeded the tyrant’s expulsion from Halicarnassus. See Romm 1998, 50.

2 See Munson 2001, 257.

3 See Munson 1988, 94-5.

4 According to Herodotus, it is not necessary to name the leaders of the allies, for they all participated to the expedition involuntarily, like slaves. See also Benardete 1969, 192-3.

5 See Munson 1988, 92.

6 About this aspect of Artemisia see How & Wells 1928, 586.

7 It is impressive that even the Athenians felt embarrassed for the daring of a barbarian woman willing to fight against Greece. Thus they offered a big reward to anyone who managed to capture her. See also Bowie 2007, 158 and Pomeroy 1976, 100.
to bring them out. However, his Artemisia avoids using sexuality or any inappropriate methods in order to succeed in her purposes. In addition, by emphasizing her talents both at a theoretical-advisory level as also in the battlefield, she represents a male Greek world. After the details of the expedition’s preparation, we shall meet Artemisia again in the 8th book of Histories, in Phalerum. Before the naval battle at Salamis Xerxes has organized a relevant council in order to ensure the crucial decision. As a monarch, he communicates with his advisors only indirectly, with the mediation of the confidant Mardonius, while the counsellors are hierarchically placed in their seats. In the question whether the crucial naval battle has to take place at Salamis or not, Xerxes wishes to hear the opinion of the majority of his allies, and they all instantly give a positive reply.

At first it is remarkable that, although a hint of democracy – liberty of speech – appears unexpectedly in the Persian council, this fact ends up demonstrating the different motives of the speakers and, finally, to justify a harsh despotism. On one hand, the speakers address Xerxes knowing that he is their monarch in any case, so the final decision is in accordance with the king’s opinion. Their vote obviously results from the fear of possible dissatisfaction of the strong man, and from his accompanying anger, and not from clear and strategic considerations which should justify the rightness of any suggestion in fact, they all express and re-echo what would please their Master.

On the other side stands Artemisia, free from ordinary barbaric stereotypes. Although she respects and accepts the emperor’s despotic environment, her role as a wise advisor isn’t determined by the pressure that the Persian system of government dictates to the rest of the advisors and courtiers. On the contrary, she appears to have the exclusive privilege to surpass the predetermined rules of the “relationship” between master and slave by assisting voluntarily in a huge expedition. The queen will defend her right to tell the truth and her attitude declares an unprecedented courage, although she risks even her own life. The value of her words is enhanced by her excellent performance during the previous naval conflict near cape Artemision. She courageously argues against fighting at sea by emphasizing the danger of a naval battle, although the Greeks are capable seamen. After all, as she claims, the main aim of the campaign – which was the destruction of Athens - has been already achieved.

After the strong disagreement in the council following Artemisia’s proposal, which underlines her strategic ability, it is going to remain useless:

8 Artemisia gave the king the best advice (7.99.3). She will prove to be an excellent advisor; her military skills go along with her strategic ability.

9 For the briefness of the majority’s speech during the council, see Konstantakos 2007, 221.

10 The whole procedure declares how despotism destroys the ability of people to take part in political issues. Of course Xerxes is totally responsible for the disastrous decision concerning the fatal conflict at Salamis, for he could easily disagree with the majority of his councillors, if he wished. However Herodotus mostly focuses on the slavishness and the servility of Xerxes’ subjects. See also Munson 1988, 96.
She suggests attacking against the Peloponnese, plotting the destruction of the Greek alliance and forcing each member to seek protection in its own homeland. In fact, the panic-stricken Greek allies were also ready to do something similar before Themistocles’ decisive intervention: when the Greeks heard about the siege and the fall of Acropolis, they instantly wanted to avoid by any means the conflict at neighboring Salamis! Someone who might respect such a logical suggestion derived from an experienced general is totally disappointed. Herodotus creates his Artemisia as a unique and manlike persona, and he needs to recall this at any occasion.

In addition, the queen really seems to worry in case Xerxes will decide to confirm the sudden attack; a possible destruction of infantry could be fatal, since the allies\textsuperscript{11} are being accused as simply bad slaves (κακοὶ δοῦλοι) of a gifted leader. Artemisia ends her speech nearly as she started, by underestimating the composition and the abilities of the Persian army. This fact denotes the Greek superiority in a level of military preparation and it is obvious that anyone could admire the courage of that “male” heroine.

Her frankness surprised the audience and, in the wake of her speech, those who sympathized with Artemisia were waiting for her punishment, in contrast with those who probably had many reasons to envy her:

When she said this to Mardonius, all who were well disposed towards Artemisia lamented her words, thinking she would suffer some ill from the king because she advised against fighting at sea. Those who were jealous and envied her, because she was given honor among the chief of all the allies, were glad at her answer, thinking she would be killed.

But their expectations were never fulfilled, since Xerxes did not hesitate to praise her advice.

Finally the king rejected Artemisia’s plan, which might end up in a Persian triumph without any serious casualties\textsuperscript{12}. As it usually happens in life, one mistake causes another, most tragic one; for the Persians, this meant their destruction at Salamis. It is in a way ironic that Xerxes follows the proposal of the majority, although they had first adopted his own opinion fearing his power! At the same time, he mentions something which shows his despotic authority in a different manner: he admits that his soldiers didn’t fight bravely in some previous battles, but he believes that this time they will behave entirely differently, as he is going to be present personally, even though from a distance.

Artemisia appears again during the naval conflict at Salamis. Herodotus, who doesn’t show any interest in describing specific highlights of the sea-fight, suddenly makes an exceptional reference to a fact which is about to increase Xerxes’ admiration of her. But the historian somehow is deceiving us – as Artemisia will also do in a while – when an apparent act of bravery proves to be a result

\textsuperscript{11} Artemisia mentions the Cypriots, the Cilicians and the Pamphylians (8.68c.1), although they were not subdued by the Persians. See Bowie 2007, 159.

\textsuperscript{12} See Flower 2006, 286.

\textsuperscript{13} See also 7.8.1, where Xerxes is going to collect the Persian nobles and announce a council in order to punish Athens, but at the same time he has already taken his decision without truly awaiting their opinions!
of treachery\textsuperscript{14}.

At the time of panic and of confusion, when an Attic trireme chased her ship in order to sink it, she

ἐδοξέ οἱ τόδε ποιῆσαι, τὸ καὶ συνήνεικε ποιησάς; διωκομένη γὰρ ὑπὸ τῆς Ἀττικῆς φέρουσα ἐνέβαλε νηὶ φιλίῃ ἀνδρῶν τε Ἐκλυνδέων καὶ αὐτῶν ἐπιπλέοντος τοῦ Ἐκλυνδέων βασιλέως Δαμασιθύμου. (8.87.2)

resolved to do something which did in fact benefit her: as she was pursued by the Attic ship, she charged and rammed an allied ship, with a Calyndian crew and Damasithymus himself, king of the Calyndians, aboard.

So there is no doubt that Artemisia did this on purpose. But what purpose is implied? It was just a matter of the much-needed salvation at the crucial moment? Or it was an old rivalry that was brewing between the two leaders, which now was tragically settled\textsuperscript{15}?

Herodotus states that it cannot be known whether there was a previous quarrel between Artemisia and Damasithymus at Hellespont. It seems that we have here one of the few cases where Artemisia acts with genuine cunning and succeeds at multiple levels. On one hand she manages to deceive the Athenian trireme, whose crew would certainly have assumed that the ship was Greek or, at least, had defected from the Persian fleet\textsuperscript{16}. On the other, she saves her life while she confuses Xerxes, who was unable, from a remote location, to distinguish with certainty the insignia of the sinking ship. This fact made Xerxes believing the words of adjacent Persian officers, so he finally praises Artemisia\textsuperscript{17}! Of course, let us not forget that the Queen of Caria proved fortunate, as none of the crew of Damasithymus’ ship escaped from drowning, so he could then blame her for treason.

At this point it is worth adding another perspective; the ironic vindication of a fraud from Xerxes’ lips could lead to another approach to Artemisia’s act, combined with what was preceded in the Persian council in Phalerum. Once Artemisia – despite her efforts – failed to contribute to the common good, she separated herself from the other allies. Isolated on marine and hostile waters, feeling that she is detached from the rest of the councillors of Xerxes, she will seek her own interest, regardless if that costs even allied innocent lives! Considering the above, her act is unconventional, mixed with aggressiveness and treason, and unacceptable at a moral level\textsuperscript{18}.

Of course all this should not leave the impression that Herodotus attempts to discredit the reputation of his home-town heroine; his admiration for the gifted and crafty spirit of Artemisia is taken for granted. She could value the importance of several moments and she was always able to use the best-fitted armory in order to overcome the danger, to avoid traps, and ultimately to survive. The disaster at Salamis led numerous Persians to perdition. The panic of a huge fleet which retreats and is defeated did not touch an intelligent leader, who found salvation in the contrivances of her own mind instead of her naval capacity.

In the last appearance of Artemisia in the narration of Herodotus, we will see her again approach Xerxes, who needs once again her advice. Briefly repeating the previous speech

15 Damasithymous, king of the Calyndians, belonged to the most notable commanders of the Persian navy. See also Bowie 2007, 178.
17 See Munson 2001, 256. Undoubtedly Xerxes had been deceived by not recognizing the identity of the sunken ship. A woman seemingly acts heroically in order to escape and survive.
18 See Munson 1988, 105.
of Mardonius, the king has to decide whether he has to remain in Greece and attack the Peloponnese, or to return to Asia leaving the deputy commander along with a large body of 300,000 infantry and horsemen. Since the queen proved to be the only wise advisor in the council of Phalerum, the monarch has every reason to renew his acquaintance, so he seeks again her assistance.

Artemisia will flatter the king by showing her preference for a conservative alternative\(^{19}\) and by confessing that her priority was always the safety of Xerxes. Besides, it was much safer to recommend the departure of the king as well, while he ran a personal risk in Greece. Even under the undesirable scenario of the failure or the death of Mardonius himself, neither the reputation nor the life of Xerxes would be compromised.

Finally the queen rejected the possible objection that the ambitious campaign failed to achieve its aim, and she declared that Athens had already been destroyed. Xerxes would certainly have the will to succeed more, but at this point Artemisia is implying that the burning of Sards during the earlier Ionian revolution was now like the one in Athens\(^{20}\). The speech is consolatory but far from any historical reality, and actually it is an effort to cover up the Persian failure. This time the advice of Artemisia is heard\(^{21}\) without overlooking the fear of Xerxes himself.

If at Salamis, the praise of the great king came actually from the distance that separated him from the field of the conflict, in this case there is nothing similar. Xerxes in addition to new praise will request that Artemisia accompany his illegitimate children to Ephesus\(^{22}\). Her presence in Herodotus’ Histories is now ending as impressively as it started; the queen of Caria who voluntarily participated in a big venture with small naval contribution but with great, ‘masculine’ confidence, is preparing to return home, carrying the blessings of the great monarch and without losing her splendor and her brilliance.

I have the sense that in some few people, some kind of elite, life is only smiling; considering the life path of that woman, obviously loads of smiles were given to her: in cape Artemision her bravery was shown, in Phalerum her risk and daring were praised, at Salamis she saved herself and her compatriots due to her cunning. If Artemisia failed at something, that was to convince the right person at the right moment. How different would everything have been, if she had succeeded in this? The answer will always leave a bitter taste, because perhaps the intuition or the prognosis of evil is not a blessing, but a curse.

The Amazons: an attempt at cultural rapprochement

Several writers of the fifth century developed a whole ethnographic literature on the legendary figures of Amazons. These narratives were frequently presenting their world as systematically subversive to the Greek culture and sometimes as an alternative cultural proposal. So Herodotus, during the narration of the failed expedition of Darius against the Scythians refers also to the customs of the nations of that region\(^{23}\). He devotes a few pages in the history of the Amazons, as an explanation for the strange practices of Sauromatae; these women of that detached Scythian tribe love hunting as well as riding, dress in men’s clothes and engage courageously

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19 See Konstantakos 2007, 228.

20 The burning of Athens had been already mentioned (7.8b.2) as the main goal of Xerxes. See also Chiasson 1982, 158 and Bowie 2007, 192.

21 In contrast with the council in Phalerum this time there is no differentiation of views. The king chooses to communicate vividly with her advisor, and we could only observe a moral conflict of characters between harsh Mardonius and wise and careful Artemisia. For more details see Masaracchia 1977, 208.

22 From Ephesus began the road to Sards, which connected with the big imperial way to the Persian capital, Sousa.

23 See Flory 1987, 108.
The Amazons, unlike all other tribes mentioned by Herodotus in his *Histories*, form an extinct race; they are figures with deep roots in mythical tradition, but they actually play a unique and central role: that of the defeated, the subjugated or the captive. The Amazons were wild and unruly, guided by an insatiable thirst for domination. Therefore, they constituted a serious threat to mankind and someone, the hero, had to fight and subdue them.

Instead, Herodotus separates himself from the well-known mythical models; in a sense he created the Amazons as historical rather than mythical characters, with obvious oddities, but not completely foreign to the habits of other nations. In the fourth book of his work the historian turns his attention to Sauromatae, a tribe that originated from the union between the Scythians and the Amazons. A group of them had survived - after their defeat at Thermodon river - and it was captured by the Greeks (4.110.1). While they carried them with three different ships, the Amazons slaughtered the guards and rushed to freedom. But as they had no skills in the sea, they drifted and arrived on the shores of Maeetian Lake, and began to live from pillages:

Local residents normally defended their land against the unknown warriors. However, they noticed something strange in the Amazons, although they were unable to believe that they did not really fight with young men. When the habitants found out - after collecting the dead bodies of the Amazons - that they were women, they realized that this difference of sex implied complementarity rather than conflict. Afterwards, they sent a group of young Scythians with instructions to imitate whatever these bizarre women were doing, in order to know them better and to eventually have children with them. One day both groups reaching and exceeding the limits of a kind of brotherhood managed to live together in a form of coexistence without the stereotypes and the inequalities of a conventional traditional marriage.

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24 See Brown & Tyrrell 1985, 208.
25 For their extinction after their defeat by the Athenians, see Lysias *Funeral* 4-6. The unsuccessful invasion of the Amazons in Attica foreshadowed in a way the unsuccessful Persian attack against Athens and Greece in general. See also Lefkowitz 2007, 8 and Vanders 1991, 65.
26 For more details referred to the battles of the Amazons against the most famous Greek heroes see Munson 2001, 124.
27 See Hazewindus 2004, 211. For an opposite view see Tyrrell 1984, 24-5, Rostovzeff 1922, 33.
29 For the obvious lack of naval skills on behalf of the Amazons see Hartog 1988, 224 and Blok 1995, 87.
30 The exposure of Amazons’ real identity interrupts any aggressive attitude on behalf of both sides. See also Hazewindus 2004, 214-5.
31 To the hypothetical question why only young Scythians were chosen to approach the Amazons, an obvious reply is that since the adults Scythians would normally be married, the youngsters were capable of accomplishing such a mission. Moreover the way of the Amazon’s life which was based on hunting and pillages, was mostly addressed to young rather than to mature men. Thus they choose to imitate them on purpose, that means to adopt tricky methods, and this attitude is frequently suitable to teens and their mentality.
33 Since the Amazons accept sexual relations and maternity, they are playing a new role, but they refuse to become traditional wives, as the Scythians might expect.
Therefore, there is no bloody end to the story, there is no suspicion of male aggression, only a strategy of approaching women. Initially the Amazons accept the femininity at the level of sexual relations and this procedure gradually ends up as a kind of taming: they are married women, having accepted and inaugurated a new form of life. Indeed, how easily could someone connect them with those “masculine” violent women who had slaughtered the Greek guards and lived illegally?

The taming of the Amazons is not putting them into a secondary value field; instead the Amazons still retain a significant degree of autonomy by participating in a new common environment. In two cases they even take initiatives, to which their young husbands immediately comply. This fact contradicts the traditional patriarchal rules which are based on the male’s domination over the female, the husband’s over the wife. Young Scythians at first accept the call for distribution of their land to live together with the Amazons. Shortly afterwards they consent to a second proposal and they all relocate to a fairly secluded place.

I would argue that the Scythians do not seem to realize that every time they obey their wives, they are increasingly removed from their roots, from tradition and ultimately from that same land. The Amazons appear to play the dominant role in such marriages even if they are going to lose their own language, since their husbands could not learn it. Essentially, both will establish an ideal community, within which men and women are numerically equal. In addition, there would be no elders needing care and attention, nor is there any necessity for women’s dowries.

Moreover, the last suggestion of the Amazons is justified by the fear of a possible retaliation from their fathers-in-law because of their demanding behavior. This fear declares their incorporation in a world which differs from their past: they were no longer rough, those supernatural monsters that might terrify everyone; neither ignore justice, nor are men’s enemies. They are active members of a new community, tortured by a guilty past but having the expectation of a hopeful future.

However, if we turn back to the Herodotean narration, it’s obvious that the women of Sauromatae act as Amazons: they ride and hunt, they are wearing men’s clothes and they also engage in warfare. They are somehow trapped between masculinity and femininity, playing roles and performing tasks that fit in both sexes, living in a country far away from civilization. Additionally a strange and harsh law prevented a young girl from marrying before she killed at least one enemy! Unfortunately, that oddity condemned some women of Sauromatae to die unmarried:

\[ \text{οὐ γαμέεται παρθένος οὐδεμία πρὶν ἂν τῶν πολεμίων ἄνδρα ἀποκτείνῃ· αἱ δὲ τινες αὐτέων καὶ τελευτῶσι γηραιαὶ πρὶν γήμασθαι, οὐ δυνάμεναι τὸν νόμον ἐκπλῆσαι. (4.117)} \]

In regard to marriage, it is the custom that no maiden weds until she has killed a man of the enemy; and some of them grow old and die unmarried, because they cannot fulfill the law.

This may lead us to a safe conclusion that marriage was not prearranged as a kind of

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35 See Flory 1987, 112.
36 See Munson 2001, 132.
37 This way of life essentially points out the woman’s position in nomadic tribes. See also Brown & Tyrrell 1985, 301 and Minns 1913, 84.
38 Clearly this harsh law decides the future and the destiny of a Sauromatian woman instead of her presumable inner desire to get married. See also Blok 1995, 88, Hazewindus 2004, 211.
privilege, and that the full incorporation of women into society relies on her primary contribution as a warrior rather than as wife. There was no differentiation between male or female activities, there was no contradiction between war and marriage as the latter is performed only after participating in an act of war. Under these circumstances the women of Sauromatae managed to preserve their traditional ‘Amazonic’ identity, although some of them had to pay a huge price.

The Amazonic Artemisia

If we now return to Artemisia, we could ask ourselves how Amazonic is this special heroine after all? The truth is that the personality of Herodotus’ compatriot has elements that separate, but also link her with the Amazons; for example, she is equally aggressive, willing to fight and participate in a campaign voluntarily without any obligation. Undoubtedly her power as a queen testifies to her high educational level, and not any spiritual roughness. Artemisia is also skilled in naval conflicts, while the Amazons were absolutely inexperienced at sea and they managed to hit the inhospitable Crimean land with the apparent assistance of luck.

We should also not forget that, although these women are in a way under the control of men, they act courageously. As their stories proceed, their actions are gradually imbued by a sense of wisdom: on one hand the Amazons take on the role of the family counsellor, while their young husbands prefer to obey. On the other hand Artemisia proves to be a wise counsellor and she offers a unique opportunity to Xerxes to avert the Persian crisis. Despite their intentions, perhaps both would cause a general reaction: the proposal of the queen in Phalerum startled and divided the Persian nobles. At the same time the parents of young Scythians would be puzzled by the decision of their sons to migrate and burn the bridges with their close relatives and their past too. Of course the main difference is that the Amazons are directly listened to by their companions - and thus is justified the origin and the strangeness of their descendants, the women of Sauromatae - while the strategic plan of Artemisia is finally rejected, regardless of its correctness.

Maybe the most remarkable common thing of these two Herodotean stories is the gradual change of the genuine characteristics of protagonists. The Amazons without losing their nomadic way of life are incorporated in a new society, in a new environment. With regard to Artemisia, her initial bravery gives way to trickery by ramming an allied ship. We would not blame her for a sudden loss of her skills but finally, when her own life was in danger, she saved it thanks to the invention of a trick and not by using her strength. And one last thing: Herodotus - like his contemporaries - was well aware of the mythical tradition of the Amazons’ defeat in Attica; close to Salamis the Athenians will again be defeating an Amazonic descendant and that ends in being a semiotic similarity.

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40 See Munson 2001, 256.
The Herodotean “Amazonic” Artemisia

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