

October 2017

## The Amazons of Exekias and Eupolis: Demystifying Changes in Gender Roles

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### Recommended Citation

Infante, Marisa Anne (2017) "The Amazons of Exekias and Eupolis: Demystifying Changes in Gender Roles," *SMU Journal of Undergraduate Research*: Vol. 3 , Article 4. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25172/jour.3.1.4>

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## The Amazons of Exekias and Eupolis: Demystifying Changes in Gender Roles

### Cover Page Footnote

2017 Larrie and Bobbi Weil Undergraduate Research Award

# The Amazons of Exekias and Eupolis

## Demystifying Changes in Gender Roles

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### ABSTRACT

In this paper, I will examine the changing gender roles of women as the Athenian government changes from a tyranny in the Archaic period to a democracy in the Classical period by comparing a Black-Figure Amphora, which depicts an image of Achilles Killing Penthesilea, by Exekias and a Red-Figure Column Krater, which depicts and image of an Amazon on Side A and an unidentified figure on Side B, by Eupolis. The creation of democracy was not the universal celebration that it is often praised to be in modern times. I will demonstrate this through a visual analysis of how the iconography of the Amazon shifts from being represented in the likeness of the goddesses, Artemis and Athena, to a portrayal of the Amazons as the Persian enemy. This shift in iconography mirrors the shift that occurred for the respect and to some extent power that was afforded to

Athenian women, especially those of an upper-class background. My comparative analysis utilizes the works of gender and feminist scholars such as Beth Cohen, Larissa Bonfante, Laura Mulvey, and Judith Butler. Both Cohen and Bonfante argue that the Amazons are representations of the weakness and struggle of women; however, using their methodology I construct an argument that counters this point of view. At first the Amazons were shown with power, power that they gained from the goddesses, Artemis and Athena; however through the manipulation of their iconography the Amazons as Persians began to represent women as barbarians and as others. Lastly, utilizing the work of Mulvey and Butler, I will examine how the gaze and mindset of the viewer changes the perception of Amazon iconography.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Classical Greece – particularly Classical Athens – is perhaps most famous, and most lauded, for being the birthplace of democracy. Yet, while often seen as being a universally positive development, the transition from the tyrannical/royal government of the Archaic Period (c. 600-490 BCE) to the democracy of the Classical Period (c. 490-330 BCE) was not beneficial to everyone. The introduction of democracy was more than just politics; it was the restructuring of society and societal norms. In particular, women suffered a loss of status, with the respect and (in some sense) power that was afforded to women differing radically between these two periods.

In this paper, I will explain how two Greek vases with depictions of Amazons demonstrate this change: one, an Amphora from the Archaic period<sup>1</sup> (Figure 1), and the other, a Red-Figure column krater from the Classical era (Figure 2)<sup>2</sup> [21]. Amazon imagery is particularly informative corpus for analyzing female gender roles because the Amazons are imagined as a foreign race<sup>3</sup>; however, through the depiction (either empowered or subjugated) of these foreign female bodies the vase paintings reveal the relative freedom or restrictions in the ways

that Greek men were comfortable thinking about women. Through visual analysis, and a critique of assumptions about Amazon iconography using gender theory, I will present the idea that Amazon iconography reflects changing gender roles during the transition of governmental from the Archaic to the Classical period in Athens.

The Archaic Period, classified as the time from 600 BCE until the Persian wars in 490 BCE, was “a critical period for women ... it was within the development of the framework of the polis that the laws and customs were established which were to determine the position of women for several centuries to come” [12, 9]. The status of women was highly influenced by the role of the tyrannical government during the Archaic period because the tyrannical government included a court system, which creates a hierarchical system of power [19]. In particular, the Athenian courts of the “tyrants” provided liberal patronage for the arts and attracted artists because many tyrants initiated public works [1]. The tyrannical government and the system of the court, which was sometimes made up of artists and other times made up of small groups who owed their position to wealth, created economical class systems because there was an obvious division of wealth and

status [1]. This economic class divide allowed for some women to be more autonomous and respected than others because they had high social standing due to the wealth and/or elite circumstances of their birth or marriage [16].

In 490 BCE, with the start of the Persian wars, the Classical era of Greece began. During the war, the Persians destroyed large quantities of art in Athens [12]; therefore, the Athenians had to radically rebuild their city – largely from scratch – when they finally defeated the Persians [18]. This sense of “starting over” inspired the Classical period ethos of innovation, experimentation, and competition. Two concepts became very important to artists during the classical period: τέχνη (Techne) and μίμησις (Mimesis) [12]. Techne is the concept of how art was portrayed and the utilization of the skills of the artists. Mimesis is the idea of art being reflective of nature, a translation of the world as imitation [12]. Competition between artists was a driving force behind the development of Classical period aesthetics, in which we see rapid shifts in how traditional subject matter (such as the Amazon myth) was portrayed.

During the Classical period, democracy was fully actualized as the new

political structure of the city of Athens [11]. Athens became the dominant political force in Greece after the Persian wars as the head of the Delian League, a group formed after the Persian wars as a method of protection against future attacks [7]. The democratic mindset for the city of Athens eliminated class systems based on economics because they viewed every Athenian male citizen over the age of eighteen as holding the same amount of power within the political arena. Women of the Classical era in Athens experienced less power than in the previous Archaic period, because now all women were reduced to holding the same legal and, to some degree, social status – that of the secondary “other”, inferior to men [11].

## 2. AMAZONS IN MYTHOLOGY

In both the Archaic and Classical periods, the myth of the Amazons was a popular representation of the strife of women. The Amazons of Greek mythology, a race of warlike women, gained recognition for their courage, pride, and autonomy. Daughters of Ares, the god of war, the Amazons were thought to live at the outer limits of the known world in a female-only society [16]. According to Homer, the Amazons were “the equal of men”, even fighting on the side of Troy during the

Trojan War [22]. In the Epic Cycle<sup>4</sup>, we are told that the Amazon Queen, Penthesilea, aided the Trojans but was killed in battle by Achilles [6]. Regardless of which myth they referenced, Archaic Greek vase painters generally depicted Amazons as wearing hoplite armor, riding a horse and holding or fighting with a bow and arrow or a spear [8]. After the Persian wars, Amazonomachies (depictions of the battles between the Amazons and the Greeks) become an especially popular version of the Amazon myth in Greek vase painting [22]. Specifically, from the end of 7th century until the 5th century Amazons are usually depicted wearing short tunics in battle scenes; from the 5th century (after the Persian wars) “they are shown ... wearing trousers” (“costume orientale”) [17, 8]. Scholars generally focus on the transition of Amazon iconography from the Archaic to the Classical periods by straightforwardly analyzing how the Amazons become allegorical for the defeated Persian enemy [15, 17]. This paper explores other ways in which Amazon representations in vase painting changed between the two periods, using gender theory to inform my comparative analysis.

### 3. ANALYSIS AND COMPARISON

In this paper, I will present an argument in two parts. First, I will argue that Amazon imagery in the Archaic period was iconographically similar to imagery of goddesses, particularly the goddesses Artemis and Athena. Thus, the transition in early Classical period Amazon imagery that is commonly recognized by scholarship – namely, the new role of the Amazons as an allegory of the defeated Persians – is not just a move toward portraying the Amazons as foreign enemies, but also a move away from portraying the Amazons in a positive and powerful light, as similar to the divine.

The second part of my argument will address the cause of this shift. The Athenians of the early Classical period did not merely survive the Persian wars; they also survived a social/political upheaval. This transition from a tyranny to a democracy changed the structure of society, raising the political power of men while lessening the status of women, especially upper-class women who would have fashioned their self-image after the goddesses [11]. Images of Amazons reflected these shifting gender roles because Amazons were a mythological group of women who retained warrior like qualities in art, while also retaining markings of the

female gender, such as primary and secondary sexual characteristics. In making this suggestion I am not disavowing previous and common readings of these vases but rather stating that there are additional layers of social implications beyond simple foreignness: Namely, the gendered and social power aspects matter as well.

I begin my analysis with one of the most famous Archaic period representations of an Amazon, the black-figure amphora, *Achilles Killing the Amazon Queen Penthesilea*<sup>5</sup>, by Exekias. The representation of Achilles and Penthesilea on Exekias's amphora shows a power struggle between the male dominated society and women's strength in building the home. The iconography and myth of the Amazons lends itself to this struggle because they are simultaneously women<sup>6</sup> and warriors like the goddesses Athena, and Artemis [16]; however, because they are women and not divinities, it is not hubris to defeat them and exert dominance over them<sup>7</sup>. By creating Penthesilea in the likeness of the goddesses, she has more power and strength than some art historians like Beth Cohen and Larissa Bonfante often allude to when they interpret images of Penthesilea and other Amazons [4, 2]. She is not just a figure meant to

represent the vulnerability of women but is also in a position of power. Her power, derived from her likeness to the goddesses is realized in three specific actions: the fighting stance that she is in, even while being attacked, the gaze that she locks onto Achilles and the gaze of the male viewer [16].

In the Exekias vase, Penthesilea draws upon the power of the goddesses, Artemis and Athena, through iconographic similarities. The iconography of the two goddesses that is important to the scene of Penthesilea includes their dress, weapons, armor and Athena's representation of the male and female genders. Artemis is commonly seen wielding a bow and arrow, alongside a fawn and dressed in a short chiton or dress with a common Greek girl's hairstyle [20]. She is the representation of a pure virgin of marrying age [16]. Athena is the goddess of justifiable war, wisdom, and often associated with the citadel of cities, which is generally assumed to be a male realm. Iconography of Athena is her helmet, spear, aegis and she is sometimes associated with snakes and owls [14]. Athena, as Athena Ergane or Athena the Craftswoman, represents the central tools of the woman, weaving and women's handiwork [14]. As Athena Ergane, she signifies the stabilizing

role of women in Greek warrior society and that women are symbols of the practical and organizational intelligence that is necessary to run a household, with the *oikos* (home and family unit) functioning as the microcosm of civil society, the *polis* [14]. Thus, Athena represents the dutiful gender roles of both man and woman.

In the Exekias Amphora, Penthesilea is shown as dressed in the hoplite armor; her shield is placed behind her, almost as if she is leaning on it as she falls to the ground. The top plume of her helmet matches that of Achilles, as well as Athena's helmet (Figure 3) and her dress is in the same short style of Artemis. In addition, her dress, made of animal skin, can be compared to the image of Artemis (Figure 4) in which she is wearing an animal skin over her chiton [8]. Moving down her body, Penthesilea is wearing pointed shoes, which contrast the bare foot of Achilles. When the shoes of Penthesilea are compared to Artemis's shoes in Figure 4<sup>8</sup>, they appear to be similar in that they are both pointy-toed, tied all the way up the leg from the ankle to the calf and both of the styles have a flap of material that falls over the top portion which sits under the knee. In addition, Penthesilea is shown in a deep lunge position with her hand up to Achilles attempting to block the spear that

he is using to kill her. Her knee barely skims the ground but does not make contact with the ground line and both of her hands are up as she continues to fight even as the spear of Achilles is thrust through her chest. This position is not entirely vulnerable because she is continually fighting even as she falls to the ground<sup>9</sup>; this contrasts the usual reading of the position as a position of weakness because she is on the bottom while Achilles stands over her [23]. If compared to a Classical vessel, The Penthesilea Cup (Figure 5)<sup>10</sup>, where her body is depicted limp, the position in the Archaic vase stands out as a powerful pose where Penthesilea holds most of the potential energy of the scene. The pose can be read as a position of power because heroes are often seen striking the same pose as they deliver the killing blow to monsters and other enemies<sup>11</sup>. On the vase of Herakles (Figure 6) fighting the Nemean Lion, Herakles is in this pose of a deep lunge where his knee is almost in contact with the ground, mimicking the pose of Penthesilea. The posture of Penthesilea creates her as the equal to Achilles in potential power not a lesser. Therefore, Penthesilea represents the power that the Amazons and their human counterparts, women, were afforded in society because it

is a pose of potential power, of the power that the person holds within themselves; women held this power in the oikos as seen in the representation of Athena Ergane.

The gaze between Achilles and Penthesilea is generally assumed to reveal the vulnerability of the Amazon and women in general, but her visual similarity with Artemis and Athena implies that this woman is not weak. In fact she is strong enough to be compared to a goddess. Building upon this power from the comparison with the goddesses, the gaze of Penthesilea is also powerful because according to Judith Butler, the feminine gaze is a way to exemplify masculinity (power, manliness). Therefore without the strength of Penthesilea's gaze in the scene, the power of Achilles would not be as evident as modern scholars believe it to be. Furthermore, the feminine gaze allows women to act as their own agents, someone who forced men into self-regulation [3]. Penthesilea's gaze regulates the power of Achilles because to make the great hero Achilles fall in love with you as you are dying is a power unto itself because he would not want to fall in love with an enemy "soldier" [10]; however, her sexuality and womanhood similar to Artemis in ripe virginity was too powerful to resist [22].

The gaze of the viewer is important when reading the vase and the power of Penthesilea as well as the social implications of the imagery. Gaze is useful in uniting formal and social theory because it is a double-sided term. The gaze of the images on the vessel is as important as the gaze of the viewer [13]. His intended viewer is an educated freeborn Athenian Greek man because the Amphora shape of the vessel would be seen in a symposium as a means of transporting wine. Other genders and people of a lower status like slaves would have viewed the amphora as well [24]; however, the gaze of the Athenian male citizen would have been privileged.

The idea of women and women's power in the oikos stands as linchpin to the power of the polis reflecting the gender and power ideals of the Archaic period. The women during the Archaic period were afforded more power because often women, especially upper-class women that would liken themselves to the goddesses, were allowed a higher social status than the women in Classical period to come. Woman's position of power and respect that is represented through Athena Ergane and the Amazon is reinforced through this phallogentric and subconscious view of the vase. It is her womanhood and identification

with the female goddesses that give the Amazon, the woman, the power to hold the whole of society together [10].

Transitioning from the Archaic representation described above to the Classical representation of woman as other, and foreigner through the Amazon figure, I will analyze a Red-Figure Column krater painted by Eupolis in 470 – 460 BCE (Figure 2). In reflecting on the iconography of the Amazon depicted here, I present the argument that the Classical depiction of the Amazon is reminiscent of traditional Persian dress and customs<sup>12</sup>. In the Classical version of the Amazon, a visual similarity is created with Persian warriors that had just fought in the Persian wars against the Greeks. I propose that the Greeks began to differ from the Archaic iconography of the Amazons as the goddesses because they wanted to show their dominance over the Persians and other “other” categories without committing hubris. In addition, the Athenian switch to democracy and an equal economic social class influenced the Athenian thought that now women were completely powerless, just as the barbarians that they successfully defeated [22].

On the red-figure krater (Figure 2), all we see is the lone Amazon, her face covered by her shield so that only her

forehead is visible. The loss of her personal identity may be a way to further subjugate her role as other because it could be the likeness of anyone that is shown here.

Therefore the viewer could insert his own wife, daughter or mother into this image and recognize her as this barbarian “other” creating a further divide between the power of man and the weakness of woman. Moving from the top of her head down, we see her helmet, scorpion-faced shield, and her spear and axe (the axe in her right hand while the spear is presumably in her left hand behind the shield). Paralleling the end of the spear is her leg, clad in vividly striped pants. In comparing this to the Persian depiction (Figure 7), we can see that the patterns and style are depicted in a similar manner with geometric zigzag patterned pants and tunic and a covered head; thus identifying her as foreign, as barbarian, as enemy. Using the feminist art historical approach as applied by Cohen<sup>13</sup> and Bonfante<sup>14</sup> in critiquing this image, there are no “indications” of her “sexuality”, in that no breast is bared, she is not emotionally influenced by the scene or violated by a man stronger than her.

Therefore, once she, the Amazon, is stripped of the characteristics of the female Goddesses, and given the characteristics of the barbarian enemy, she is representation of

Athenian triumph over the barbarians and “others”.

Much like the Black-Figure Amphora, this vessel would have been used in the symposium setting. A volute krater was used as the vessel that mixed the wine and water in the center of the *ανδρῶν* (andron), the room in which the symposium took place. The guests of the symposiarch, the man in charge of the symposium, would have been placed in a circle around the krater as it sat in the middle. As the symposium progressed, the guests would have begun to talk about the image on the vase, and they would have interacted with the image of the lone Amazon. Therefore, the gaze of the viewer is an important aspect of this vessel as well. The Athenian educated freeborn Greek man would have recognized the iconography of the Persians that the Amazon is adorned in. Most of the men gazing upon the vessel would have been a part of the war against the Persians; therefore, they would know first-hand what the Persians looked like as well as how they behaved. The ambiguity of the Amazon that is depicted would have allowed them to place their “own” woman into the image. This view of their relative as the barbarian other allows them to see their subjugation and withholding of power as a necessary

action. Likening the Amazon to the Persian ‘other’ shows the restriction of women’s power for this reason; it justifies the limiting of women’s rights because women are a type of “other”, potentially an enemy who could destroy Athens just as the Persians did the first time.

Comparing the gaze of the Archaic male and the Classical male the difference lies within the dissimilarities between the societies and the gender roles that the societies hold to be true. According to images in LIMC, the transition of the iconography exists across all vase painting not just the two vases that I have presented here. After performing my own primary research on vases with Amazon iconography using the LIMC<sup>15</sup>, I found that out of fifty-one Archaic vases (with documented dates) forty-three of them have images of Amazons that are painted in the likeness of the goddess and only eight of them were in the likeness of the Persians (Figure 8) [8]. These eight that were in the likeness of the Persians had dates that fell within the Late Archaic period, toward the beginning of the Classical era and the start of the Persian wars. Additionally, in the images of the Amazons from the Classical period, there were fifty-eight in total and forty-eight of them were in the likeness of the Persians,

like the Red-figure column krater, while eight were in the likeness of the goddesses and two were in the likeness of both the Goddesses and the Persians (Figure 9) [8]. Therefore, gaze and iconography is important because it demonstrates the difference in the period eye, as it applies directly to creating other images, between the Archaic and the Classical. Reflecting on the image of the Amazon on the Red-figure krater with this idea of period eye and the stats of the Persian iconography greatly increasing in the Classical period, I propose that the conclusion can be made that this Amazon represents how the change in democracy lead to a decrease in the respect and power that women were afforded in Classical Athens.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, I argue that the two conceptual depictions of the Amazons are linked in their expression of the transition of the social role of women in the wake of the Persian wars and the birth of Democracy. Exekias and Eupolis's depictions of the Amazons demonstrate the societal norm for the respect and value that women were afforded. Indeed the representation of Amazon as enemy in the Classical period contrasted with the Archaic Exekias

Amazon as Goddess demonstrates that Classical Athenian women had even less power than their mothers and grandmothers whose gender ideals and societal norms are reflected in the black figure Archaic amphora. Therefore, the Exekias Amphora and the Eupolis Krater demonstrate the change in gender roles from the Archaic to the Classical because of the differing representation of the Amazons.

## 5. ENDNOTES

1. This vase is a black-figure Amphora painted by Exekias in 540-530 BCE. The title of the amphora is “Achilles killing the Amazon Queen Penthesilea”. Currently the vase is on display as part of the collection of the British Museum. An amphora would have been used as a storage vessel for liquids, most likely wine.
2. The Red-Figure column krater with an Amazon is housed as part of the collection of the Dallas Museum of Art. This krater was painted in 470-460 BCE, which chronologically is part of the “new painting era” in Classical art. On this vase, there are two depictions on either side. On the first side is the Amazon from which the krater gets its name and on the other is a young man holding what appears to be a bow from a bow and arrow and is dressed in a full-length chiton, the typical dress of the time period. A column Krater would have been used in order to mix water and wine in the symposium.
3. Imagining the Amazons as non-local women was nonthreatening to the Greek man because he could not directly compare his wife to this foreign woman because she is not Greek. However, it stands as a good representation because the Amazon is still woman enough that she, in their minds, still represents womanhood as an abstract thought.
4. The Epic Cycle was a collection of Ancient Greek epic poems that related the story of the Trojan war. The two Homeric epics, the Iliad and the Odyssey, are among the poems of the Epic Cycle.
5. This is not the ancient title of the Amphora but a modern way to describe the amphora.
6. In the usual canon of black figure, she is painted white to identify her otherness as woman.
7. In Aristotle’s Rhetoric there is one of the best ancient discussions of the word hubris. He discusses it as “doing and saying things at which the victim incurs shame, not in order that one may achieve anything other than what is done, but simply to get pleasure from it” [5]. Hubris was not essentially a religious term; however, the gods were often inclined to punish those who acted upon it because either they were dishonored or because they felt the need to hold the Greek citizens to high moral and social values [5].

8. The depiction of Artemis is from an Attic vase in which Artemis is chasing and killing to Giants; in the image she wears a short chiton, with animal print overlay, pointed toe shoes and has her short hair wrapped with what looks like a modern day headband.
9. This pose juxtaposes the stance of defeated warriors that is often indicated by their knees touching the ground; however, the pose of Penthesilea and the pose of Herakles in Figure 6 have the knee raised from the ground. The knee raised from the ground in addition to the grip on the shield signify that she is still fighting back.
10. Penthesilea Cup; Achilles kills Penthesilea, Athenian red-figure cup, c. 475- 450 BCE.
11. Figure 6: Herakles kills the Nemean Lion, Polyphemos Group, Reggio di Calabria, Italy. 560-540 BCE, Black-Figure Pottery.
12. In Classical representations of the Persians they are often depicted as “Other” by wearing long pants that are covered in a geometric pattern. Often times this contrasts them from the Greeks because the Greek heroes are often nude. In Amazonomachy scenes, the Amazons are seen in the same geometric patterned pants and with shoes. In addition, the Persian weapon is a bow and arrow, which is the weapon that many Amazons are depicted with in the Amazonomachy scenes.
13. In the article by Cohen on Divesting the Female breast she segregates the nudity of the female into 4 categories. The first category is women wearing garments designed to expose the breast. Category two is breasts purposely divested of clothes by females themselves. The third category is breast exposure by garments accidentally loosened or set in disarray through an action or pose of the wearer. And category 4, the category that pertains to the discussion of Amazons is female breast exposure through the violent ripping or loosening of garments on the account of a violent interaction with others. This category includes a discussion on the exposed breast of an Amazon being a symbol of violation and humiliation through defeat.
14. Bonfante breaks down the subject of nudity for men, women, and barbarians in her article. While the Amazon depicted on the Red-Figure vase is not nude, Bonfante’s argument applies because in order to discuss nudity she first highlights the importance of

clothing and what wearing clothing represents.

15. In order to classify the different vases into the Archaic and Classic time periods, the vases first had to have documented dates, I did not judge based on stylistic evidence or Black vs Red figure vases. The next classification that

the vases had to meet was that they had to be at least three-fourths complete. Lastly, the imagery was similar to either the iconography of the Exekias vase, in the likeness of the goddesses or the Eupolis vase, in the likeness of the Persians.

## 6. FIGURES

**Figure 1:** Achilles Killing the Amazon Queen Penthesilea; Exekias as Potter and Painter; Vulci, Italy; Attica; 540-530 BCE; Black Figure Pottery



**Figure 2:** Red-Figure Column Krater with Amazon; The Eupolis Painter; 470-460 BCE; Red-Figure Pottery



**Figure 3:** Athena Promachos Andokides; Painter; Vulci, Italy; Attica; 530 BCE



**Figure 4:** Artemis Chasing the Aloadae; Attica; 445 BCE; Red-Figure Pottery



**Figure 5:** Penthesilea Cup; Penthesilea  
Painter; Vulci, Italy; Attica; 470-460 BCE;  
Red-Figure Pottery



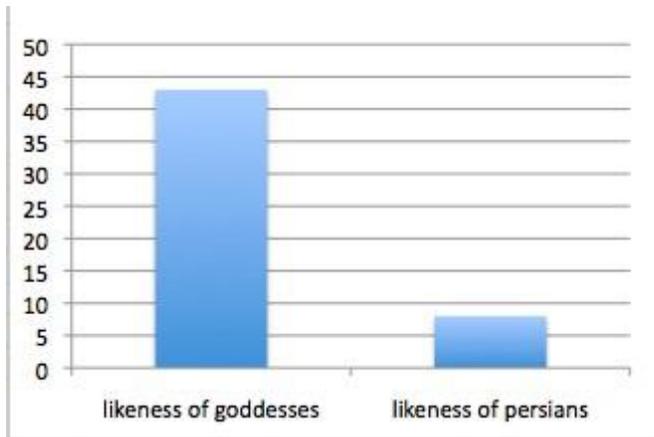
**Figure 6:** Herakles Kills the Nemean Lion;  
Polyphemus Group; Reggion di Calabria,  
Italy; 560-540 BCE; Black-Figure Pottery



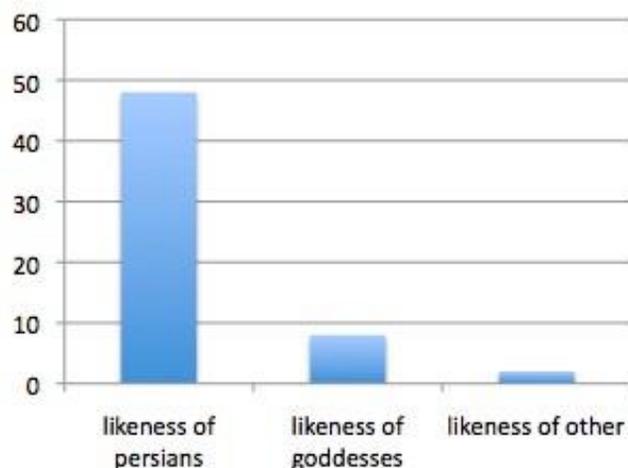
**Figure 7:** Plate; Epiktetos; Vulci, Italy;  
Attica;  
520-510 BCE; Red-Figure Pottery



**Figure 8:** Charts the amount of Archaic period vases (600 – 490 BCE) that have both documented dates and full images of the Amazons depicted on them instead of fragmentary. In order to categorize the imagery, the vases needed to be at least three-fourths complete. Additionally, the vases that are categorized as “likeness of goddesses” are the vases that depicted the Amazons in a similar manner to Exekias’s vase, while the likeness of persians are vases that depicted the Amazons in a similar manner to the Eupolis vase.



**Figure 9:** Charts the amount of Classical period vases (490 - 323 BCE) that have both documented dates and full images of the Amazons depicted on them instead of fragmentary. In order to categorize the imagery, the vases needed to be at least three-fourths complete. Additionally, the vases that are categorized as “likeness of goddesses” are the vases that depicted the Amazons in a similar manner to Exekias’s vase, while the “likeness of persians” category represents vases that depicted the Amazons in a similar manner to the Eupolis vase. The last category of “likeness of other” includes two vases that either showed both iconographic groups or as solely women.



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