



Summary :

Mythological creatures which, according to ancient writers, lived in the north, at the edge of the Ecumene and fought each other over gold. The myth of the fight of the Arimasps against the Griffins first appears in Greece in the 7th cent. BC and is found in literature and works of art.

Geographical Location

Black Sea

1. Arimasps: written sources

The myth of the Arimasps and the Griffins was introduced in Greece by the poet [Aristeas of Proconnesus](#) (an island in the Propontis), in the 7th cent. BC. Although his epic poem, *Arimaspea*, is not extant, [Herodotus](#) offers some information on its content. Aristeas, as Herodotus relates, travelled to the land of the Issedones, where he was informed of the one-eyed Arimasps who lived further north, and of the Griffins who guard their gold and lived even further north. The Hyperboreans inhabited the lands that came after these, up to the sea. According to Aristeas, these people, apart from the Hyperboreans, waged war against each other. The Arimasps ousted the Issedones from their land, the Issedones the [Scythians](#), and the Scythians the [Cimmerians](#).¹ The same author informs us that the name Arimasps derives from the Scythian words arima (=one) and spou (=eye).²

According to the myth, the Arimasps were constantly fighting against the Griffins over gold.³ The land in which Aristeas and Herodotus locate the Arimasps is loosely defined as northern Europe, the edge of the Ecumene, while later literature locates them over the Ripaeian Mountains in Asia. Herodotus, although expresses his reservation as to whether they were one-eyed creatures, he does believe that these tribes were real. Diodorus Siculus exhibits a similar attitude,⁴ while in the scholia on Pindar we find the name of their king and primogenitor, Arimaspos.⁵ Eustathius, for whom the Arimasps are a 'Scythian tribe', tries to rationalize their one-eyedness with reference to their practicing in archery, which forces them to keep one eye shut all the time to take aim. According to the same author, Dionysius Periegetes calls them 'areimaneis' or 'areimanius'.⁶ Most of the Greek and Latin literature, however, rehashes Herodotus' information, adding occasionally some purely decorative details.⁷

2. Griffins in literature and art

The second ingredient of this myth is the Griffins, mythological creatures whose origin and morphological development are rather complicated. The form of the griffin was processed in ancient Greece both in literature and the visual arts. Starting with the first reference to them by Aristeas, during Antiquity the Griffins became monsters hostile to men, in the form of lions with head and wings of an eagle.⁸

The visual form of the griffin has also developed along rather complicated lines. It is believed that it first appears in the East. In Greece the griffin, a creature combining the features of a bird and a four-legged animal, first appears during the Minoan period and is known through its depiction in Knossos and other places of the Aegean.⁹ The form of the Creto-Minoan griffin, however, is rather different to that found in Archaic and Classical art. A new type of griffin was introduced in Greek art in the late 8th cent. BC from the Middle East,¹⁰ appearing initially on the Aegean islands¹¹ and from there to mainland Greece.¹² The Archaic griffin bronze busts¹³ and numerous relevant depictions in orientalising pottery, coins and miniature sculptures belong to this type. The Archaic griffin has a gaping beak, mane and horns and only in the Classical period we have the appearance of the type of griffin familiar to us, with its realistic representation of the features of the eagle and the lion. Its form becomes the standard theme of various depictions in artwork: sculpture, coins and various other artefacts as well as on painted vases. The griffin is especially found on depictions on Attic vases of the so-called Kerch style dating mainly to the 4th cent. BC,¹⁴ where it usually accompanies representations of the [Amazons](#), [Apollo](#)



and Dionysus.¹⁵

3. Griffins in mythology

Greek mythology associates griffins with various deities. In Aeschylus they are the hounds of Zeus, in Nonnus they are the animals of Nemesis, while in various works of art the griffin is often associated with Dionysus. Their association with Apollo, though, is the strongest. They are linked with him through the Delian myth of the Hyperboreans, and they pull the god's chariot during his journey to the Hyperboreans. Apollo Epiphanius is depicted galloping on a griffin. In ancient Greece the griffin was understood as a solar symbol,¹⁶ but its association with mineral gold ascribes chthonic characteristics to the creature.

Griffin representations were extremely widespread in Scythia, where the form arrived via two routes; from the East¹⁷ as well as from the Greek [colonies](#) of the north Black Sea.¹⁸ Griffins came to be closely associated with Scythian mythology, where they represented a chthonic element.¹⁹

From the 5th cent. BC onwards, the visual form of the griffin is increasingly associated with the Arimasps in Greek art and during the 4th cent. BC their fight becomes a standard theme on Attic vase painting on the [Kerch style vases](#).²⁰ In literature, we find a parallel version of the myth about the Arimasps and the Griffins. This is in fact the tale of the ants, from which the Indians steal gold.²¹ In Ktesias the ants become griffins and acquire their full form in Solinus. This myth is now strongly reminiscent of the version where the Arimasps are featured. The ancients themselves observed this similarity.²²

4. Interpretation of the myth

Interpreting the myth of the fight between the Arimasps and the Griffins is a daunting task. In Greece, it first appears as a literary theme, where the protagonists are located in exotic places, and thanks to mythopoeic imagination acquire fictional characteristics. As it often happens, this myth could be based on elements of truth. Therefore, some scholars have interpreted it literally and believe that behind the fictional details lies a real ancient race, the Arimasps.²³ There is also the view that the Griffins who Aristeas and Herodotus mention are not creatures of the imagination but the name of an ancient people,²⁴ who, due to the similarity of the myth about the Griffins of the north and India, in the literary tradition were transformed into fictional monsters. The vagueness of the information about their environment allows scholars to locate them in various areas, between the Urals and the Altai in Siberia, an area where Siberian-Scythian tribes lived. For this reason the appellation Arimasps is thought to derive from the ancient Iranian word *aspa*, meaning 'horse'.²⁵

Another view underlines the mainly mythical element of the theme and interprets it as a translation into Greek tradition of an element of Scythian, or, through it, an even earlier mythological tradition. Griffins, based on the analysis done on Scythian works of art, are seen as an embodiment of the other world.²⁶ The fight between the Arimasps and the Griffins in this case acquires a symbolic dimension, expressing the concept of the obstacles the soul has to overcome on its journey to the kingdom of the dead or the struggle between the Upper and the Underworld over the possession of divine matter, which is represented by gold.²⁷ The Arimasps are understood as the guardians of the borders of the land of blissfulness.²⁸ We should recall that the Arimasps of Aristeas and Herodotus were neighbours of the Hyperboreans, an idealized people, associated in Greek mythological tradition through Apollo with the worship of Helios. It is not accidental that Apollo travels to their land flying on a griffin,²⁹ a tamed beast³⁰ of the underworld.

Any interpretation of this theme, the literal or the purely mythological, has a common element. The myth about the fight of the Arimasps and the Griffins reflects the mythological beliefs of the ancient Iranian-speaking tribes of Asia and the northern Black Sea, which found their way in Greek cosmology and pictorial tradition after the Greeks came into contact with the world of the Scythians.



1. Hdt. 4.13.
2. Hdt. 4.27.
3. Hdt. 3.116.
4. Diod. Sic. 2.43.5.
5. Schol. ad Pind., *Ol.* 3.24.137.
6. Eust., *Schol. ad Dion. Per.* 31.
7. Aesch., *Pr* 802-806; Paus. 1.24.5; Plin., *HN* 7.2.10; Solin. 15.20-22.
8. Aesch., *Pr*, v. 802-804; Paus. 1.24.5; Ctes., *Ind.*= *FHG*, frag. 45.26; Ael., *NA* 4.27; Philostr., *VA* 3.48; Nonn., *D.*, v. 383-386.
9. Τσαβέλλα-Enjen, X., *Τα πτερωτά όντα της προϊστορικής εποχής του Αιγαίου* (Αθήνα 1970), p. 68, pl. 1-23.
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11. Samos: cf. Βοκοποπούλου, I., *Ελληνική τέχνη. Αργυρά και χάλκινα έργα τέχνης στην αρχαιότητα* (Αθήνα 1997), p. 224; Rolley, C., *Les Bronzes Grecs* (Freibourg 1983), p. 72, fig. 52. Earrings dating to 650-600 BC from Melos: Deppert-Lippitz, B., *Griechische Goldschmuck* (Mainz 1985), p. 109, fig. 57; Δεσποίνη, Α., *Ελληνική τέχνη. Αρχαία χρυσά κοσμήματα* (Αθήνα 1996), no. 52. Cycladic oinochoe of the group Ad, of the 1st quarter of the 7th cent. BC: Cook, R.M., *Ελληνική αγγειογραφία* (Αθήνα 1994), p. 137, fig. 14.
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