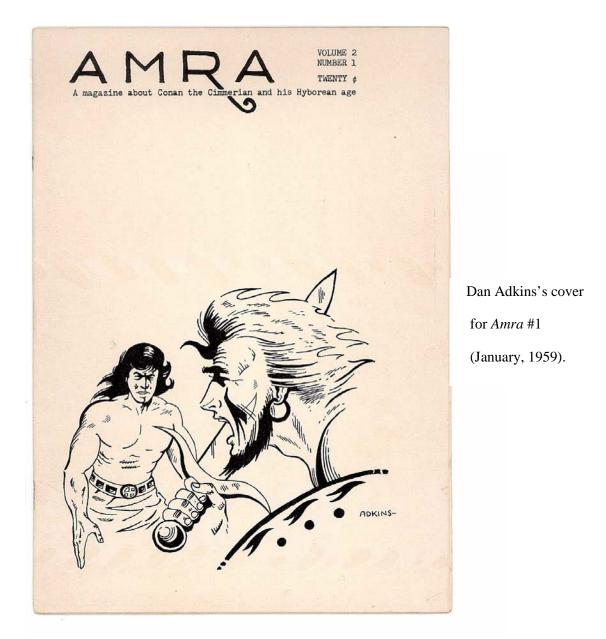
THE REMEDIAR CHRORICLERS #2

By Lee A. Breakiron

A LION AMONG FANZINES



Robert E. Howard's Sword & Sorcery epic "Queen of the Black Coast" portrays Conan as having adopted the soubriquet "Amra the Lion" during his years as a corsair with Belît and again during his junket to Stygia in the novel *The Hour of the Dragon*. The name "Amra" makes its first appearance as

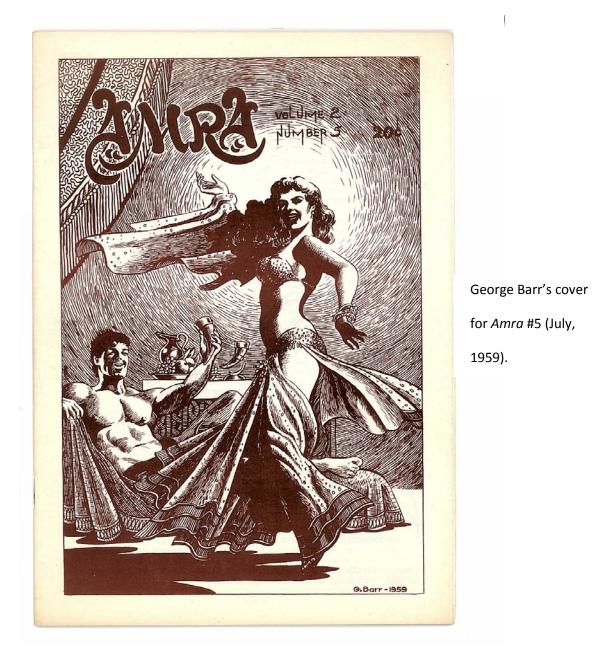
"Am-Ra," a young barbarian in two story fragments and two poems [1]. Howard substituted "Amra of Akbitana" for "Conan the Cimmerian" when he rewrote "The Frost-Giant's Daughter," after the story's rejection by the pulp magazine *Weird Tales*, for submission to the fanzine *The Fantasy Fan*, where it was published as "Gods of the North."

Among small press publications, though, *Amra* is remembered as the name of a long-running semi-pro fanzine of distinction that was the first such to be devoted to Robert E. Howard (REH) and his creation, the Hyborian world. Or so was the stated intention of editor George H. Scithers [2], and though it contained some letters and poems and an article by REH, *Amra* would turn out to pertain only to Conan among Howard's heroes, while having most to do with heroic fantasy in general and even science fiction. It also featured pieces of original fiction, poetry, and art, as well as articles on history, archaeology, weaponry, and what was termed Hyborian technology by fantasist, editor, and contributor L. Sprague de Camp. As David Gentzel points out, *Amra*'s unequalled 33-year run (for its Vol. 2), from 1959 to 1982, was largely due to the stability of its editorial staff [3]. Scithers and de Camp directed the publication throughout its run, maintaining a level of interest that is remarkable in itself. *Amra* twice won the Hugo Award for best fan publication, in 1964 and 1968.

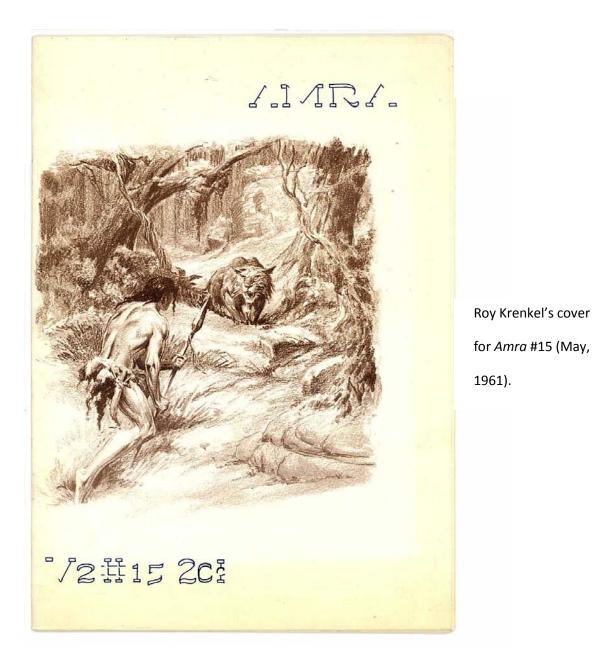
Amra was the official publication of the Hyborian (occasionally rendered Hyborean) Legion, founded Nov. 12, 1955 by 12 "stalwart admirers of Conan from New York and Philadelphia gathered in the latter city to give honor to Conan and his creator" [2]. The officers elected were Gnome Press publisher Martin H. Greenberg and fans George R. Heap (secretary to the Philadelphia Science Fiction Society), Dr. John D. Clark, Oswald Train, de Camp, and Manny Straub. The Legion convened at many science fiction conventions in the East and Midwest through the '50s and '60s.

The first volume of Amra consisted of mimeographed newsletters edited and published by Heap. Lasting only a few issues, it contained no artwork and little or no Howard content or anything else of lasting interest [3]. After a lapse of a couple years came the second volume, which was a semi-professional publication with art by the likes of Roy Krenkel, Dan Adkins, George Barr, Frank Frazetta, Jeff Jones, Tim Kirk, Gray Morrow, Alex Niño, and Bernie Wrightson. Respected fantasy and science fiction authors de Camp, Poul Anderson, Marion Zimmer Bradley, John Brunner, Ken Bulmer, John W. Campbell, Avram Davidson, August Derleth, Harry Harrison, Frank Herbert, Fritz Leiber, Katherine MacLean, Michael Moorcock, E. Hoffmann Price, Richard Tierney, Ted White, and Roger Zelazny contributed articles, stories, poems, and letters, as did critics Anthony Boucher and Donald Sidney-Fryer and a generation of serious fans, including Howard scholars Glenn Lord, Fred Blosser, Bill Cavalier, Marc Cerasini, and Charles Hoffman. As fan, fantasist, and contributor Lin Carter put it, *Amra* was an ideal place to observe writers at play and to see what they turned out for the amusement or appreciation of their colleagues [4].

Hereafter, we will be referring only to *Amra*'s Vol. 2. The format was 7 by 10 inches, with only minor fluctuations, and ranged in page count from 16 to 28 (mostly running 20), counting the covers, until the last two issues, which each had 40 pages. The cover price started at 20 cents and had increased to \$1 by issue #70, then doubled to \$2 along with the page count. The earliest issues were printed on a lithograph press, a method which limited the use of some types of artwork. Scithers said his earliest printing costs totalled slightly over \$30 per issue, but he never revealed the size of his print run. He complained that the magazine lost too much money to justify offset-printing, though by the third year, most pages appeared to be offset-printed. Color was used occasionally, mainly on the covers, starting with issue #5. At first mailed bare with the address printed or pasted on the back cover along with the postage, from issue #14 on, they were mailed in envelopes that often featured Krenkel illustrations. Also, loose items were sometimes inserted in the issues [3]. In 1974, reprints were published of the first three issues, and they are noted as such on the contents pages and have black and white, rather than black and beige, covers.



Issue #15 saw the debut of Roy George Krenkel, Jr., a former EC Comics artist who would go on to publish more than 300 drawings in *Amra*. It was his sketches on covers and interior pages that caught the eye of editor Donald Wollheim, leading him to offer Krenkel the job of cover artist for the Ace paperbacks of Edgar Rice Burroughs reprints in 1962. When Krenkel couldn't meet some of his deadlines, he brought in his friend Frank Frazetta, who did the amazing covers of the Lancer paperbacks that did so much to popularize Howard during the fantasy boom of the 1960s [5].

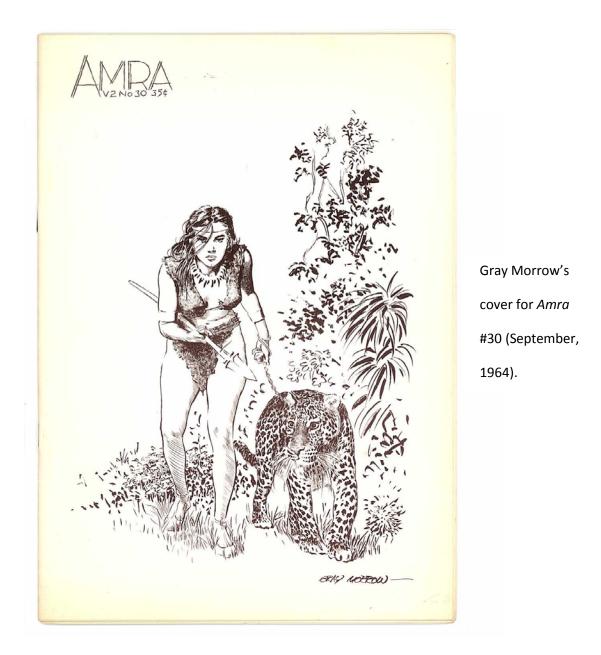


In a roundtable discussion by fanzine publishers, editor Scithers said that art played an important role in *Amra*, but that producing the fanzine was probably not worth the trouble involved. The other participants considered *Amra* to be good and entertaining, but said that it never tried to be more. Its irregular publication schedule was singled out as a fault [6].

Fanzinist Arnie Fenner, in a review of Howard fanzines, generally praised *Amra*, saying it "quickly became one of the most interesting and impressive fanzines of its type published," but added that *Amra* suffered from writers taking their subject matter far too seriously when they "hadn't the foggiest notion as to REH's feelings or aspirations" [7]. Maybe so, but such diligence is, in part, what can raise fan writing to the level of scholarship, and it was Fenner's own lack of such seriousness that would undercut his own

efforts in the field, as we will see later in this series. It is obviously impossible to take Robert E. Howard too seriously.

At its best, *Amra* was a delightful mixture of critical reviews, studies, history, homages, and spoofery. Fanzinist Wayne Warfield put it best when he said that *Amra* "captures what fandom is, and what it would like to be better than anyone else" [8].



Perhaps the archetypical *Amra* article was "An Informal Biography of Conan the Cimmerian" by P. Schuyler Miller, John D. Clark, and de Camp in issue #4. The former two, with REH, has written the seminal "Hyborian Age" essay [9], and Clark had edited the first Conan hardbacks issued by Gnome Press, beginning in 1950. This *Amra* article was the first of many (published elsewhere) that would try to construct a coherent saga about Conan and his world, though Howard had never claimed to be doing anything other than relating the tales as they came to him. The article was expanded as a series of

prefatory excerpts in the Gnome Conan hardbacks and the Lancer paperbacks, and was expanded again when it was published in *The Conan Swordbook* (Mirage Press, 1969) and *The Blade of Conan* (Ace Books, 1979). It appeared under de Camp's exclusive byline when it appeared as "Conan the Indestructible" in Robert Jordan's pastiche *Conan the Victorious* (Tor Books, 1984) as well as in later Tor Conan books.

In hindsight, the contributions of so many REH pasticheurs (de Camp, Anderson, Carter, Björn Nyberg, and John Pocsik) might seem to bias *Amra* toward a practice that has done Howard's reputation no little damage over the ensuing decades, particularly in view of the control de Camp exercised over the publication of Howard's fiction between the editing of the Lancer paperbacks, starting in 1964, and continuing into the mid 1990s [10]. Indeed, Fenner [7] and Warfield [8] complain that, due to the constant presence of Carter and de Camp, *Amra* often seemed as if it were a fanzine devoted to them and their opinions, rather than to Robert E. Howard.

However, de Camp certainly played a role in popularizing Conan, and it was in *Amra* that he made his greatest contributions to Howard criticism, publishing a 36-page exegesis of Hyborian nomenclature, reviews of many REH books, and speculations about the Hyborian world and barbarism in general. De Camp was the first, in *Amra* #29, to note the probable inspiration of the assassination attempt scene in "By This Axe I Rule"/"The Phoenix on the Sword" as being the successful assassination of Pizarro in 1541. The best of these *Amra* articles by de Camp and others have been preserved in the Mirage Press hardbacks *The Conan Reader* (1968) and *The Conan Swordbook* (1969) and in the Ace paperbacks *The Blade of Conan* (1979) and *The Spell of Conan* (1980). De Camp also recycled some *Amra* content in his *Blond Barbarians and Noble Savages* [11].

Leo Grin, editor of the prozine The Cimmerian, said of de Camp [12]:

He was instrumental in attracting a collective of Howard fans that centered around the magazine *Amra*, and that met at various cons and gatherings throughout the '50s and '60s. Over the years he lured all sorts of people, many of them revered professionals, into going on record about REH in various contexts. It's hard to resist the notion that this helped firmly anchor REH at the center of the burgeoning fantasy market of the 1960s. The exact degrees and results of these ministrations are endlessly arguable, but the list of magazines, anthologies, book introductions, and fanzine articles that de Camp impregnated with a Howardian presence is formidable.

Though de Camp has been justly accused of undervaluing Howard's greatness as a writer and for editing and pastiching him for financial gain, it was in the pages of *Amra* that what enthusiasm he had for Howard is on best display, in pieces that brought him no remuneration. He summarizes his involvement with the Conan stories in his article "Conan's Ghost" [13] and states his case for pastiching there and in his article "Editing Conan" [14], justifying his "corrections" of Howard's prose and bowdlerization of his racial slurs, but concluding that Howard "was a real pro."

Scithers would later opine that de Camp built the Conan franchise after retrieving Howard from pulp obscurity and that "there seems to be a great deal of controversy in Robert E. Howard fandom these days, and in what passes for Robert E. Howard scholarship there is a lot of strong anti-de Camp feeling ... We can even understand some of the complaints. *Dark Valley Destiny* [Mr. and Mrs. de Camp's biography of REH] may have told too many uncomfortable truths. Robert E. Howard was a thirty-year-old post-adolescent who killed himself when he could not emotionally survive his mother's death. Both de Camps, with the help of Ms. Griffin, a professional child psychiatrist, tried to figure out why. Maybe some people didn't like what they concluded" [15]. Clearly, Scithers remained oblivious to all post-*Amra* Howard scholarship.

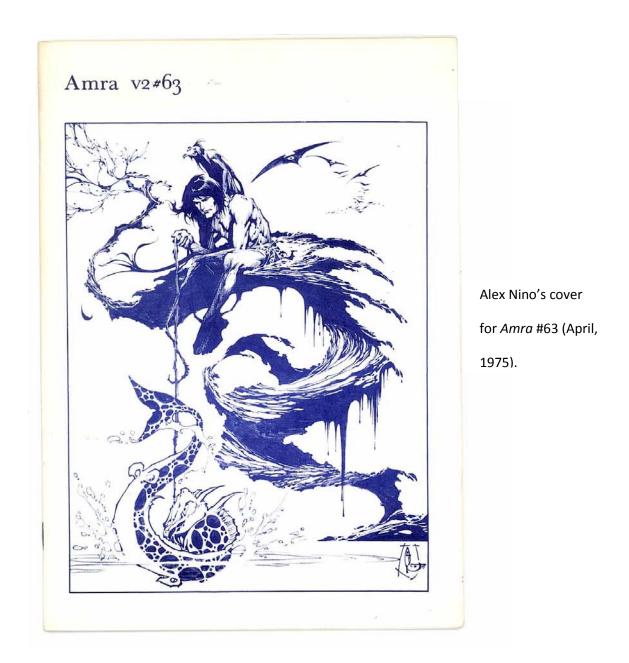


Jeff Jones's cover for *Amra* #44 (October, 1967).

Scithers went on to edit (among others) *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* (for which he won two Hugo Awards) and, for about 20 years, the modern incarnation of *Weird Tales*, along with writer and *Amra* contributor Darrell Schweitzer. Scithers also published fine editions via the small Owlswick Press and received the World Fantasy Award for Lifetime Achievement.

One interesting revelation came out of a de Camp article in *Amra* #67 entitled "Stirrups & Scholarship," namely that de Camp would have taken an interest in Howard much sooner had he not been repulsed early on by REH's boner of mentioning stirrups in his "Kings of the Night," a story set before said paraphernalia had been invented. In later issues of *Amra*, there was some argument about the validity of de Camp's criticism, though I wonder more about how he could have let a historical quibble blind him to the obvious quality of Howard's prose.

De Camp's memoir on L. Ron Hubbard, "El-Ron & the City of Brass" in *Amra* #46, was revised as "El-Ron of the City of Brass" for an appearance in his Literary Swordsmen and Sorcerers series in the August, 1975 issue of *Fantastic*, but de Camp omitted it from his book Literary Swordsmen and Sorcerers: The Makers of Heroic Fantasy (Arkham House, 1976) after he was harassed by Hubbard's followers in the Church of Scientology.



Schweitzer considers Marion Zimmer Bradley's article "... And Strange Sounding Names" in *Amra* #10, on selecting euphonious names for characters and settings, as essential reading for the would-be fantasy writer [16].

It was in *Amra* that the accepted appellation of the literary genre invented by Howard was bestowed. Fritz Leiber had first suggested "Sword & Sorcery" elsewhere [17]. When Michael Moorcock brought up the subject in *Amra* #15 [18], Leiber replied, in #16, "I feel more certain than ever that this field should be called the "sword-and-sorcery story" [19]. And so it was.

One of the first persuasive arguments for Howard's literary greatness appeared in an article entitled "Conan the Existentialist" by Charles Hoffman, his first article on REH, and was cited as such by Don Herron in his epochal critical anthology **The Dark Barbarian** (Greenwood Press, 1984). Lacking Hoffman's contact information, though, Herron was only able to reprint the article 20 years later in his **The Barbaric Triumph** (Wildside Press, 2004) **[20]**. With the exception of Hoffman's article, Herron thought *Amra*'s contributions were mostly "Hyborian scholarship" and hardly serious criticism.

Amra ran indices of its contents every tenth issue. Fanzinist Dennis McHaney published retrospectives of the *Amra*'s first 13 issues [21] and the following 9 [22]. He also indexed appearances of Krenkel's art in *Amra* and elsewhere in [23]. The first comprehensive index of Vol. 2 was published by Dave Gentzel [3]. It anticipated my bibliography below by including abstracts, and is more extensive than mine is because it covered all the contents, including art, rather than being limited to REH-related material.

On the current market, the first printings of *Amra* #1, #2, and #3 sell for about \$50, \$40, and \$30 each, with the second printings garnering about \$10. The most valuable issues are #4, #7, and #9, selling for about \$100, \$170, and \$90 respectively. #6 and #8 are worth about \$45 each; #10 and #11 about \$30 each; #12-#28 about \$20 each; and #29-#42 about \$15 each; and the rest from \$5 to \$10 each.

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Amra, Vol. 2 ran for 71 issues between Jan., 1959 and July, 1982.

The list of articles below is complete insofar as it contains all items relating to Howard, excepting those by Howard himself (being primary references and cataloged elsewhere) and those inspired by Howard, such as poems by others (being primary references by those authors). Articles relating to art, comic books and magazines, and movies are included only if there is a strong REH connection. The list is in alphabetical order by author and then by title. The abstract, if any, is in brackets. It contains all places where any of the articles have been reprinted, including the Mirage Press hardbacks *The Conan Reader* (1968) and *The Conan Swordbook* (1969) and in the Ace paperbacks *The Blade of Conan* (1979) and *The Spell of Conan* (1980), as well as any articles in those books that did not appear in *Amra*.

REHupa = Robert E. Howard United Press Association.

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Boardman, John	"Additions to the Original Exegesis" [of de Camp in #s 4-6] in Amra, Vol. 2 , #45 (Terminus, Owlswick, & Ft. Mudge Electric St. Railway Gazette, Eatontown, N.J.), p. 18 (early Dec., 1967)
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