

Inconvenient Women:  
In Search of History's Warrior Women

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8 December 2008

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The history of women has been written by men and their lives have usually been seen from a man's point of view. A huge chunk of human history has been purposely left out or ignored – women have played a more important role, not only in their respective societies, but in the history of the world, than traditional research has revealed. We have not so much a history of women at this point as a “history of the relations between the sexes. Therein lies the crux of the problem: the source of woman's identity and otherness” (Pantel xix).

Sarah B. Pomeroy describes this disparity most succinctly in her book, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves*, which explains why there should be more focus on this subject: “The story of the women of antiquity should be told now, not only because it is a legitimate aspect of social history, but because the past illuminates contemporary problems in relationships between men and women. Even though scientific technology and religious outlook clearly distinguish ancient culture from modern, it is most significant to note the consistency with which some attitudes toward women and the roles women play in Western society have endured through the centuries” (xii).

Historically, in literature and art, women have usually been portrayed as non-equals with men, and very little known literature was written by women. As Pauline Schmitt Pantel observes, “In general, the sources provide a man's view of women and of the world” (4). Women pervade nearly every genre of classical literature, yet often the bias of the author distorts the information... In addition,

misogyny taints much ancient literature (Pomeroy, *Goddesses* x). “Unfortunately” says Merlin Stone, “instances of inaccurate translations, biased comments, assumptions and speculations innocently blend into explanations of the attitudes and beliefs in ancient times. Male bias, together with preconceived religious attitudes, raises some very pressing and pertinent questions concerning the objectivity of the analysis of the archaeological and historical material available at present. It suggests that long-accepted theories and conclusions must be re-examined, re-evaluated and, where indicated by actual evidence, revised” (xxii).

In order to tell the story of how history has obscured and distorted the truth about the real lives of ancient women, this paper will focus primarily on discussion of the reality of the legendary female warriors the Greeks called *Amazons*. Amazons have become the *de rigueur* icon of the strong, independent woman, although that image has been tarnished by centuries of confounded and misguided misinformation. As a result, “Amazon” is frequently used as a disparaging term. As we shall see, the Amazons were not cartoon characters or the “man haters” Greek mythology has taught us to believe. They were an extended tribe of flesh-and-blood nomads of “unique” customs who traded with the Greeks and, on occasion, interacted with them on the battlefield.

### **The Mythical Amazon**

The Amazons, legendary long before the Persian Wars, had become the mythological enemies of Athens. Aeschylus called them “the warring Amazons, men-haters” (Hamilton 424). Jeffrey M. Hurwit describes them as formidable

women-warriors from beyond the boundaries of the civilized (i.e. Greek-speaking) world (169). *The New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology* describes them as a mythical race of mounted female archers from the region of Caucasus in Asia Minor, who consorted with men only for the purposes of propagation (Guirand 122). According to the *Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*, Amazon was the Greek name for Goddess-worshipping tribes in North Africa, Anatolia, and the Black Sea area, who supposedly once ruled over a large part of Asia Minor. During the Trojan War, they were allies of the Trojans; their queen, Penthesilea, was killed by Achilles. Later, after Athens' legendary founder-hero Theseus had kidnapped Antiope, sister of the Amazon Queen Hippolyta, her enraged armies attempted to rescue her by invading Attica and besieging Athens and the Acropolis, but were defeated by him. From that time on, Amazons and Greeks were enemies (Walker 24-26; Hamilton 425, 217; Graves 122).

Historians throughout the centuries have been using Amazons as symbols of womanhood gone astray and the ancient Greeks were no different. From the eighth century BCE, they occupied central Greek thought as the 'other', an outsider who represented the antithesis of Greek ideas about the values of the polis (Stewart 572). Their myths came to symbolize the 'loner', a warning to women who desired to withdraw from or reject the polis and the restrictions that came with their 'civilized' role as wife and mother. Because rebels were a danger to Greek society as well as to themselves, Amazons presented a danger to patriarchal states like Athens because they threatened the status quo by introducing the concept of individual freedom to Athenian women, freedoms that

were being taken away from them as their men increasingly nurtured and enjoyed democracy (Stewart 574).

Women were (and still are) “honored and esteemed” in the private sphere where they were traditionally relegated (Pantel xx) but the moment they tried to escape those confines they ran into the practically impenetrable wall of male prejudice and the bastion of male pride, hence the basis of patriarchy. Athenian aristocrat and historian Thucydides (c.460 BCE – c.395 BCE) sided with the ancient world's prevailing view of women when he remarked “the less said about them the better...” (qtd. in Pantel 2). Centuries later the Roman historian Plutarch (46-120 CE), in his brief essay on “The Virtues of Women”, observed that there was “nothing particularly distinctive” about the feminine branch of the human species (qtd. in Pantel 2). More modern historians such as Jacob J. Bachofen (1815-1887) who is credited with the creation of the “myth of matriarchy” characterized gynecocratic regimes by the absence of law and morality, which effectively wrote women out of Greek history as well as all history (Georgoudi 449, 462-63).

Matriarchy (literally, ‘mother power’), a term forged in the nineteenth century as an analogy with patriarchy, was suggestive of two characteristics: the superiority of women over men in the family as well as in society; and the exclusive recognition of maternal kinship (matrilinearity). Bachofen's “theoretical edifice” rested on two profoundly antagonistic principles: the feminine and the masculine, which he said were in constant conflict. Matriarchy, he said, was based on religion, on the importance of the archetype of the Great Mother, Great

Goddess or Mother Earth, with whom nearly all the ancient goddesses have been identified (qtd. in Georgoudi 450-56).

Goddess worshipping societies were known to the Greeks, of course. There are legends of women who worshiped a powerful, courageous Warrior-Goddess, who hunted and fought in the lands of Libya, Anatolia, Bulgaria, Greece, Armenia and Russia. These legends seem to have been responsible for the numerous reports of female soldiers later referred to by the classical Greeks as Amazons (Stone 3). In accounts of Amazon women in Libya which lingered even in Roman times “all authority was vested in the woman, who discharged every kind of public duty. Men looked after domestic affairs, were not allowed to undertake war service, fill any public office and reared children immediately after their birth” (Stone 34-45). Diodorus of Sicily, a first-century BCE historian, wrote of warrior women in Libya who formed armies which had invaded other lands; the Goddess was their major deity (Stone 35). Athens belonged to Athena, the great virgin warrior-goddess, and Artemis, the virgin huntress, was worshipped under her different names all over the Greek world. She was, of course, the Amazons’ main goddess, and it was said that they had founded her temple in Ephesus (Wilde 20). This female divinity, revered as warrior or hunter, courageous soldier or agile markswoman, was sometimes described as possessing the most “curiously masculine” attributes, the implication being that her strength and valor made her something of a freak or physiological abnormality (Stone xxi).

Bachofen’s misogyny is revealed in his belief that ‘Amazonism’ was a necessary transitional phase in the evolution of humanity, although he

considered it to be a degenerate form of the female sex (Georgoudi 453). In Bachofen's view, primitive man, becoming "restive under maternal constraint", used his physical superiority over woman to abuse her sexually. Rebelling against the violation of her rights, primitive woman had a need to evolve toward a "purer civility" and became an Amazon, "resisting the male by force of arms" (Georgoudi 453). Another of his convictions was that matrilinear systems were necessarily more primitive than patrilinear ones, a conviction, says Georgoudi, "that has led to confusing matriarchy with matrilinearity and matrilocality" (456). Bachofen believed that patriarchy, the more civilized form of human evolution, superseded matriarchy.

Historians such as Jules Michelet (1798-1874) and Bachofen placed women under the head of Nature while placing men under the head of Culture (Pantel xvi). Pantel believes that Michelet was echoing the prevailing view of his day, a view that was further developed by anthropologists such as Bachofen (xvi). In the late nineteenth century, she says, when history took shape as an academic discipline, men were engaged in writing about the history of men, which they presented as a universal history, all the while excluding women from their analysis. Women were simply not considered worthy of "serious consideration." Alongside "scientific history" there grew up a "women's history" that still exists today, separate and apart (Pantel xvi). As Pantel points out, there is a need for historians to reexamine the nature of their discipline and to take the history of women as seriously as men (xvii).

Various historians have posited many theories about the genesis of the Amazons; most of them were focused on patriarchy-based interpretations. In 1861 Bachofen regarded the Amazon myth as “a relic of prehistoric matriarchy.” The advance of patriarchy and its domination over matriarchy, he said, had forced the angry priestesses of the Goddess to become warriors (100-01; Stewart 572). Walther Leonhard (1911) believed that Amazons were actually a “Greek reminiscence of clashes with the beardless Hittites” and referred to them as a small-statured race of “bow-toting mongoloids” (Stewart 573). Roger Hinks (1939) wrote that fifth-century Athenians had translated historical episodes such as their decades-long clashes with the Persians into symbolic illustrations called *Amazonomachies* in which the Persians were feminized into Amazon warriors. And Schultz Engle (1942) said that the Greek campaigns against Amazons were motivated by “castration anxiety” (qtd. in Stewart 573).

Susan Langdon’s more reasonable approach describes Amazons as “fierce female warriors of a variable but usually northern origin at the edge of the known world...a stock motif of classical art and myth (whose) unconventional gynocentric culture has provided western civilization with one of its most useful tropes of alternative culture and classical Greece with a quintessential icon of topsy-turvy, the antithesis of proper social ordering in the polis” (1). For an Athenian citizen, hoplite, and defender of the city, Amazons were the ultimate paradox, “symbols of a world stood on its head.” They were warriors without a city, “a permanent menace to the civilized world” (Pantel, 226-27).



### **The Athenian Viewpoint**

More recently, Philip Slater (1968) viewed them as a “misogyny of Athenian thought” concluding that the myth “primarily describes an event in the emotional life of each male child” (Stewart 573). Based on ritual masks found at Tiryns, Langdon describes rites of passage for boys that signaled their separation from the female world and entry into the world of men, including what she calls “trial by Amazon.” In this rite the initiates ritually fought an antagonist who wore a terrifying Gorgon mask and carried a votive shield painted with a Greek warrior locked in combat with an Amazon. “The ritual slaying of a female figure,” she writes, “could symbolize the boy’s readiness to leave the female-dominated household and join the male community” (4-5).

In myth and art the power of the Amazons received more emphasis than their sex (Lefkowitz 5). It was important for ancient Greeks to fight against and defeat a heroic opponent, one who presented the prize of “imperishable fame” which could result only from combat between equals (Langdon 6). It is possible that initiates were required to symbolically defeat the mighty Amazons because they represented the heroic ethos – Langdon explains that “Heroic death was the high prize of aristocratic masculinity, to be won at an equally high price” (6). The *Iliad* characterized Amazons as *antianeirai* - the “equivalent of men” or “manlike” - that is, worthy opponents against whom heroes tested their mettle. Therefore, confronting these female warriors constituted a major heroic feat and the slaying of an Amazon in particular articulated the heroic ethos of combat against an equal. Amazons, in other words, were fearsome enough opponents for heroes to

make their reputations by defeating them (Langdon 3, 6). The fourth-century orator Lysias wrote that the Amazons were seen as male in nature rather than female because of their bravery “so much more did they seem to excel men in spirit than to be at a disadvantage in their form” ((2.4-6) qtd. in Stewart 584).

Amazons occupied a marginal place in Athenian society – they were on the fringes, geographically and socially, the inverse of the polis. Herodotus (IV.114, 117) and Hippokrates in his corpus *Airs, Waters, Places* (late fifth-century BCE) called them the *parthenoi* or ‘unwed girls’, virgins who had no *open* sexual relationships with men (17; qtd. in Stewart 578). *Parthenoi*, said Stewart, were wild adolescents who had not been tamed by marriage. Even their bodies were different, much more like those of boys than of women (579). According to Hippokrates the name *Amazon* or *A-mazon* meant ‘breastless’, referring to mutilation by cutting or searing off their left breast but Stewart thinks the name refers to the “sexual unripeness of the nubile adolescent.” Amazons, considered unruly teenagers until they married, were undeveloped, undomesticated, and unrestrained. Living beyond the confines of polis society, they mated with men “at their own convenience and pleasure,” adolescent free spirits who posed a threat to their fathers’ authority over them (Stewart 579-80).

Amazons as ‘loners’ were classified with the established enemies of law and order; women who attacked men were considered destructive to themselves as well as to the rest of society. The myths’ message was directed to both women and men, a warning that anyone who withdrew from or hated ordinary family life could be dangerous to society as a whole. “Whatever we now might

think of the merits of Amazons,” says Mary R. Lefkowitz, “the Greeks treated them as negative illustrations of what might happen if warrior women were in control, as a means of avoiding a dangerous hypothetical situation the potential for which in fact did not exist” (5-12).

Elizabeth Baynham agrees: “The hostility may run deeper than just the concept of Amazons as barbarians or ‘others’. They are portrayed as feral and unnatural creatures, at the same time as charming and dangerously alluring. They are ambivalent beings who take on male *arête* or virtue, and share masculine pursuits with Artemis, as well as enjoy her protection; they are sexually arousing but do not behave with passive servility or make good wives and mothers for good Greek men” (116). Lefkowitz tells us that according to Herodotus every feature of Amazonian society had a direct antithesis in ordinary Greek practice. In ancient Greece, women did not hunt or go to war and women’s initiation rites did not involve exposure to physical danger; women nursed their children and stayed at home (4). Amazons challenged the cultural stereotype of docile femininity by “exhibiting a vigorous and resourceful courage in battle,” remarks Stewart, as well as an independent sexuality (584).

Homer called the Amazons *antianeirai* or ‘antimen’. The prefix ‘anti-’ is an ambiguous term which can mean “equal to”, “like” or “a match for”; conversely, it can also mean “opposite to” or “antagonistic to” (Liddell n.p; Stewart 576). From the eighth century BCE Amazons occupied a central place in Greek thought as the *Other*, the anti-male, a non-Greek speaking ‘barbarian’, wild and uncultured (Stewart 572; Boardman 7). But the opposite meaning is also true: the Amazons

as warriors had god-like stature, worthy opponents for any Greek male. The ambivalence they felt about these female warriors was expressed by the fifth-century BCE Athenian author and orator, Lysias, in a speech honoring the war dead in 389 (2.4-6). He described the Amazons as formidable enemies but insisted on denigrating them: "When matched with our Athenian ancestors they appeared in all the natural timidity of their sex, and showed themselves less women in their external appearance than in their weakness and cowardice" (Lefkowitz 8).

Hurwit refers to Athens as a "bastion of male privilege" where women were passive and submissive (239). They had no political rights or freedoms, could not own property or vote, and possessed little or no legal rights. They were thought not to have the cognitive powers of men and were not even recognized as life-givers - that role was owned by men. Woman was simply the fertile ground to be sown, acting as a vessel to hold a developing life but who took no actual part in its creation. Women were expected to subjugate themselves to the city-state, producing male children capable of becoming proper Athenian soldiers who could protect Athens and safeguard it for future generations (Lagerlof 86, 95; Adams 138). Athenian men were expected to defend women in their servitude - any other role outside of those narrow confines became a threat to their society (Lagerlof 89).

In contrast, the Amazons appeared to possess the same rights and freedoms that men enjoyed. They rode horses, hunted, waged war against men, lived as they chose and, more to the point, chose to live without men (Hurwit 169;

Stewart 95). They were formidable women-warriors from beyond the boundaries of the civilized (i.e. Greek-speaking) world (Hurwit 169). “The Athenians thought about the Amazon first as a warrior and then as a woman,” remarks Tyrrell (22), yet, for all their strength and skill, Amazons usually lost their battles against male heroes, especially if they were Greek (Lefkowitz 5).

### **Historical References to Amazons**

Greek literature on Amazons began around the eighth century BCE; they were mentioned in Homer’s epic poem the *Iliad* (Davis-Kimball 117-18). Tyrrell believes that the Amazon myth “was developed by men in charge of the media” who focused on a clash of gender roles, emphasizing on a conscious level a clash of arms more than sexual conflicts (22). Jeannine Davis-Kimball tells us that:

Throughout the classical and Hellenistic (332-30 BCE) ages, a host of Greek poets, playwrights, philosophers, and historians continued to write about the Amazons’ exploits, seasoning their accounts with a mixture of admiration and contempt. Plato praised them...for their readiness to fight in defense of their nation, and Aeschylus proclaimed them “virgins fearless in battle,” though the latter’s declaration of their chasteness seems to be a minority opinion – most Greek authors stressed the women’s sexual freedom as much as their boldness on the battlefield, claiming that the women, who usually lived separately from men, dallied with the opposite sex with wild abandon once a year to ensure the propagation of more little Amazons (116).

Lysias reported that the “daughters of Ares” were the first in their region to be armed with iron, and they were the first of all to mount horses. They had high courage and seemed to excel men in their spirit. But, noting that they were not content with conquering the nations in the immediate vicinity of their homeland

(which he ascribed to Anatolia, the west coast and central part of modern-day Turkey) and that they had dared to march against Athens, he recounted “with great relish” their inevitable downfall. Lysias called them savages who worshipped a cold-hearted, all-powerful mother goddess who demanded blood sacrifices (including humans), yet, Davis-Kimball wryly observes that he “seems to bemoan the Amazons’ demise only because it robs the Greeks of a chance for their praises to be sung by a vanquished enemy” (117-20).

Legend tells us that Amazons lived apart and refused all contact with men, that they were hostile to lasting unions of any kind (Georgoudi 453). However, not every historian viewed the Amazons as “man-haters”: Homer called them the “equals of men” (Davis-Kimball 117-18). Herodotus (IV.110-17) and Hippokrates (*Airs, Waters, Places* 17) our two most informative fifth-century sources, give many details about Amazon interest in the men who trespassed into their territory as well as their romances and marriages with them. “So much for the notion that the Amazons were always implacably hostile to men” (Stewart 577). Lorna Hardwick tells us that they were by no means consistently portrayed negatively and that “the archaic and classical Greeks, far from denigrating them, cleverly used their formidable prowess in battle to enhance their own status as victors” (17; Stewart 575). Regarding more recent misconceptions, Andrew Stewart thinks that “In the twentieth century, Amazons usually get a bad press. Every man knows (or thinks he knows) what one looks like and what she represents. Big, busty, butch, and bad-tempered, she challenges his ego on every front. Yet

this image is peculiarly modern; in ancient Greece, an Amazon was young, trim, sexy, and by no means necessarily an implacable man-hater” (572).

### **Imagery**

During the Classical age (about 500 to 323 BCE) the motif of the female warrior became so popular it was given its own name – *amazonomachy*. Every conceivable surface was decorated with Amazons, including ceramics, jewelry, temples, and ultimately, the Parthenon. A favorite subject of vase painters, they began to appear on Greek ceramics in the seventh century BCE (Davis-Kimball 113; Lissarrague 226-27). Beautiful, young and slim, early Amazons were depicted dressed in Greek armor carrying Greek weapons; their femininity was not stressed (Stewart 579; Wilde 24; Tyrrell 2) (Fig.1). Hippokrates believed that Amazons had no right breast because it was cauterized during infancy, yet no sculpture has ever been found depicting Amazons in this way. “Amazons in art always have both breasts” observes Lefkowitz (3, 5). Phidias made popular the bared right breast in sculpture – his Amazons were sexually mature, part of the male fantasy (Stewart 584) (Fig. 2).

Myth and art focused on the power of the warrior women rather than their sex (Lefkowitz 5). In black-figure paintings they were repeatedly portrayed in combat with either the civilizing hero, Herakles, or the Athenian hero, Theseus (Lissarrague 226-27; Tyrrell 2-3). By the sixth century BCE, as the craze for Amazon scenes grew, Herakles began to appear in combat with Amazons; toward the end of that century scenes of Herakles against a single Amazon had

become popular (Tyrrell 3) (Fig.3). His feminine opponents appeared suddenly “in force and without apparent antecedents” which, according to Tyrrell, may have a political explanation (2-3).

According to Lyn Webster Wilde “...the great wave of enthusiasm for depicting Amazons in art, either on vases or in friezes, (in particular) happened after the Battle of Marathon in 490 BCE (24). Pausanias (I, 17, 2), writing in the second century BCE, recorded when the mortal Herakles, enemy of the Amazons, first became a divine hero: “For Herakles was first decreed to be a god by the Marathonians, as they themselves say” (Pollitt 108). Many pottery scenes show them in peaceful, domestic pursuits, such as taming horses or bathing (Fig. 23), but most show them in battle with mythological heroes or Greek troops, usually getting the worst of it (Fig. 4). Most Greek authors and artists stressed that no matter how brave or skilled the Amazons were in battle they were no match for male Greek warriors (Davis-Kimball 115-18). John Boardman has suggested that the message of a Greek work of art is often a “compound of religion, myth-narrative, politics and propaganda” (*Classical Period* 111). In Attic imagery there was no radical distinction between mythology and everyday events; myth was used to dramatize certain moments in the social lives of the Greeks (Lissarrague 227).

Images and iconography are an important source of information about ancient women and the use of a vase often determined its iconography. We find ritual themes on ritual vases and feminine themes on vases used by women; the context reinforced the power of the image. But Amazons and *maenads* (frenzied



female followers of Dionysus) most commonly appeared on objects used by men in banquets. Such images were not destined for women's eyes. Women appeared in many guises on the images on Attic ceramics, but whether portrayed as mothers or wives, *hetaerae* (courtesans) or musicians, Amazons or *maenads*, they were "always objects on display for the pleasure of the male viewer" (Lissarrague 229). It is important to note that in virtually every pictorial representation of Amazons in battle, they are shown being defeated (Davis-Kimball 114-15).

### **The Epinetron**

Perhaps one of the most interesting examples of *amazonomachies* can be found on *epinetra*, ceramic pottery vessels used by Athenian women. Formed in the shape of a "u", this ceramic device was meant to cover a spinner's knee and lower thigh while working wool to prevent grease from the wool from spoiling her clothes. Ornamental *epinetra* were placed on the graves of unmarried girls or dedicated at temples, usually to the goddess Athena. Often, an *epinetron* was given as a wedding gift. Typical *epinetra* had a head or bust of Aphrodite on the front of them and were decorated with scenes of women weaving or even of Amazons. A famous black-figure *epinetron* (Louvre MNC 624, 500-480 BCE, attributed to the Diosphos painter) currently residing in the Louvre in Paris, has a group of women working wool painted on one side, and on the opposite side are three "grim-faced and muscular female warriors preparing for battle" (Davis-Kimball 112) (Fig. 5, 5b). Another in the Athens National Museum (circa 510

BCE) shows three Amazons dressed as hoplites taking up their shields (Lissarrague 227).

Dr. Davis-Kimball speculates on possible meanings for the Louvre epinetron: did the woman who owned it see some other meaning in it besides a warning? As she points out, it seems unlikely that an Amazon would have used such a device herself - Herodotus tells us that the Amazons described themselves as archers, javelineers, and riders who had not learned the “works of women” ((IV.114, 117) 251). To cultured Athenians of the time, the two panels represented “nothing less than the Athenian feminine ideal and its antithesis, a cautionary tale of the horrors that would be unleashed if the natural and proper social order were disturbed” (Davis-Kimball 113). Unlike their male counterparts, who embodied the ideal of the warrior that most young boys would aspire to emulate, women in the myths are rarely held up as models for young girls, and even more rarely for the same qualities of strength and courage that male heroes displayed (Harris 344-45). The depiction of Amazons, at least in the case of the Louvre epinetron, most likely was not meant to represent the feminine heroic ideal, but as Davis-Kimball observes, perhaps its original meaning was interpreted in an unintentional way. “When I look at the amazonomachy on the epinetron” she says, “I can’t help believing that, despite all her social conditioning, an Athenian woman gazing at those free-roaming warriors must have felt at least a twinge of envy as she sat and worked her wool” (130).

Why would women have images of Amazons on their epinetrons? Perhaps to remind them of the dangers inherent in being too independent, to stay

comfortably within the boundaries set up for them without complaint. Perhaps such images were reminders of something more subtle. Some Greek myths placed the female principle at the beginning of time and endowed it with “venerable primordial power.” Woman was equated with the earth: primitive, chaotic, obscure, undisciplined, and dangerous. The ancient Greeks believed that when women ruled, the spirit remained earthbound; it was men who owned a sublime spirit (Georgoudi 462-63). The ancient Greeks had developed the philosophy of *sophrosyne*, self-knowledge that leads to measured, rational self-control and resistance to excess. Greek men knew their boundaries; women needed to submit to men’s higher judgment because they lacked the *sophrosyne* that men possessed (Stewart 584). Free of the confines of civilization, Amazons were sexually intriguing to the male viewer (Stewart 573); images of Amazons and maenads as barbarians and savages competed for surface space as male fantasies of the primitive wild woman. An amphora in the Louvre (Fig. 6) shows Theseus abducting Antiope, queen of the Amazons. Sexuality, based on antagonism and violence, was conceived and portrayed as warfare but set in the mythical time of the founding of Athens. Such images were meant to reinforce the Amazons’ essential ‘otherness’ for Athenian women, as seen by men (Lissarrague 227-28).

### **Sculptural Images**

Naturally, Amazons were portrayed in stone as well on pottery. Pliny mentions a sculpture competition held in the fifth century BCE between the most

highly praised Athenian artists to create a famous group of Amazons which was to be dedicated in the temple of Artemis at Ephesos; the winner of the competition was Polykleitos (Pliny, N.H. XXXIV, 53, qtd. in Pollitt 225; Boardman, *Sculpture* 213). On the front of the Athenian Treasury at Delphi, built sometime in the decade after the Battle of Marathon, an amazonomachy was depicted in its metopes and one of the most substantial amazonomachy friezes remaining once graced the Mausoleion at Halikarnassos (Pedley 163-4; Osborne 218-19) (Fig.7). Perhaps the most famous example of amazonomachy resides in the sculptural program of the Parthenon; all four sides of the temple had carved metopes which illustrated mythological battles but on the western side were Greeks fighting Amazons dressed in oriental tunics and hats, who were a metaphor for the Persians (Boardman, *Sculpture* 104, 106; Spivey 140-44). Pericles' sculptural program on the Parthenon called for an overall theme that reflected both the Persian Wars and the legendary victory at Marathon; the politics of those wars as described in the Parthenon were couched in mythological metaphors (Boardman, *Sculpture* 109). Interestingly, the total number of Amazons scenes dropped quite sharply after the end of the Persian Wars (Stewart 582).

### **Amazons as Persians**

Before 530 Amazons were typically portrayed as Greek hoplites, wearing short chitons, greaves, crested helmets with round shields and spears (Shapiro 106) (Fig. 8). After the Battle of Marathon in 490 BCE the Greek military style of

dress in which Amazons were usually portrayed changed to a much more Ionian or Near Eastern influence: they were portrayed as Scythians in patterned trousers, close-fitting sleeved jackets, and stiff, leather caps with cheek flaps. They are frequently shown mounted with quivers and curved Scythian bows (Shapiro 111; Tyrrell 51) (Fig. 9). A well-known Attic black-figure amphora from the late sixth-century BCE (MS 1752, U. of Penn.) (Fig. 10), now in Philadelphia, depicts Herakles fighting two Amazons dressed in pointed Scythian caps with cheek flaps, Scythian style jackets and patterned trousers (Shapiro 111; Univ. Museum 2001). Early in the fifth century the costume of the Persians enters the repertoire ostensibly as a metaphor representing the Persian Wars. The Persian style, in some ways similar to Scythian, is of Middle Eastern or Asian origin: a long-sleeved top or caftan, tight spotted or striped trousers, high boots, earrings and the tall, pointed hats of the steppe nomads (Davis-Kimball 113-14, Wilde 25).

Phidias was apparently the first to thematize this motif on his great shield belonging to the chryselephantine cult statue of Athena Parthenos, completed in 438 (Stewart 584) (Fig. 11). The iconography of the Parthenos, housed within the Parthenon and surrounded by and saturated with mythological and historic imagery, was completely understandable to a fifth-century Athenian (110). Fully armed and dressed in an elaborately decorated helmet and aegis, she was created of ivory and gold sheets laid over a wooden core and probably stood about 11.5 meters tall. At her left side rested a giant shield nearly five meters across portraying scenes of Amazonomachy on the outside and Gigantomachy on the inside. On the exterior of the shield (Fig. 12) were scenes of Amazons as

Persians storming the walls of the Acropolis (Boardman, *Sculpture* 110; Boardman, *Parthenon* 246; Hurwit 25-26). For Athens the Persian Wars had evolved into 'heroic myth' (Lagerlof 78). Order, justice and civilization itself were preserved in the historic battles described on the Parthenon's walls, statue and her shield (Hurwit 235). The stories of Marathon and the Amazon attack on the Acropolis were so important that they were depicted twice in the Parthenon's imagery - on the western metopes and on the exterior of the Athena Parthenos shield (Hurwit 169). The Amazons were an important and easily recognizable iconography in other parts of Greece as well. For instance, R.R.R. Smith writes that the temple of Artemis at Magnesia had a 175-meter frieze taken up entirely with an Amazonomachy, "practically overwhelming the figure of Herakles" (184).

The Persians would have enslaved the Greeks if they had won the Persian Wars (Tyrrell 63) but the metaphor had even deeper meanings for the Greeks. It has been suggested that fifth-century Greek males were sensitive to issues of masculine pride almost to the point of phobia - they feared being identified with the feminine in any way and saw the Persians in their effeminate garments as the antithesis of Greek ideals of masculinity. Therefore, any identification with the feminine was contemptible and raised conflicting feelings about the essence of manhood (Adair 3, 4).

Soft Asian men evoked in the imagination hard Amazon women (Tyrrell 63). Amazons were not just representatives of Persian tyranny; they were an expression of the Athenian fear of women (Lagerlof 90). The symbolism of the Persian War in the iconography of the Amazons reflected these male-female

roles, which they saw as a complete breakdown of law and order in the universe (Adair 3, 4). The Amazons represented the “un-domesticated female power”, the negative, dark side of human nature (Hamilakis 3). They embodied the primitive, archaic, and chaotic as opposed to the masculine traits of logic, reason, light, supreme power, law and civilization. Woman was considered the origin of all evil, or the enemy as told in the myth of Pandora, the first woman, which was depicted on the base of the giant Athena Parthenos (Lagerlof 89). Jeffrey Hurwit succinctly explains this cultural ideology:

...it needs to be stressed that the Parthenon's disputation on gender was but one expression of a broader intellectual or philosophical position. The fifth-century Athenian (like Greeks in general) saw or constructed the world in terms of polarities or oppositions – culture and nature, human and animal, rational and irrational, Greek and barbarian, and so on- in which the first terms of every pair (culture, human, rational, Greek) constituted the norm and the ideal. In such an intellectual context, it is not surprising that the imagery of the Parthenon addressed many of these other antitheses as well.....So...the victory of Theseus over the Amazons was not only the victory of normative patriarchy over abnormal matriarchy. It was also the victory of civilization over barbarity and disorder, of west over east, of Greece over “the other”, of Athens over Persia...Still, in fifth-century Athens there was perhaps no stronger cultural antithesis than that of male and female, and it would have been surprising had the images of the Classical Acropolis failed, somehow, to address it (242).

Athena, the great Parthenos who had granted victory to Athens over Persians, was an image meant to reinforce women's societal roles and the Parthenon was dedicated to her.

Why did the Greeks not simply celebrate their victory over the barbarians in their form as Persians? Why did they need to be transmuted into Amazons? “Clearly, something else was going on,” remarks Wilde (24). “Female tyranny” was the Greeks' notion about barbarian despotism particularly during and after

Persian Wars. Stewart says that the Amazon-Persian analogy feminized and denigrated Persians to a certain degree. They and other foreigners were compared disparagingly to women and wild animals because as 'barbarians' (non-Greeks) they lacked *sophrosyne*. The Greeks equated the Persians with adolescents in an arrested stage of development; less civilized, sophisticated, cultured and mature than themselves (Stewart 573, 584), which made them a natural comparison to Amazons. However, as Mary R. Lefkowitz observes, defeating an Amazon does not necessarily represent the triumph of the male hierarchy over women or express male sexual domination (11); strictly speaking, in Athenian society, they were not (yet) women. Stewart qualifies their attitudes: Amazons, he said, should "by no means be stigmatized as simply a bunch of cowardly women. They were daughters of Ares; they sacrificed to him, and fought like tigers" (Stewart 584), therefore they were still considered worthy foes.

Athenian victories over the Persians were mapped onto preexisting gender conflicts. According to Stewart, "Amazons satisfy one obvious requirement for a representation of an alien but nevertheless human enemy: they look and are different from nude Greeks without being bestial, monstrous, or grotesque...Amazons...were all too obviously human, conveniently located beyond the Greek world's eastern borders, formidable fighters, and sexually intriguing to boot. All this made the Amazonomachy a far more subtle symbol of Greek male prowess in action..." (Stewart 583).

To the Greeks, the Persians seemed like effeminate men and the Amazons like masculine women. Both dared to challenge the Greeks on their



own ground; and they both reeked of a different way of life that the Athenian Greeks must have found both fascinating and repellent (Wilde<sup>24</sup>). The combined significance of the images of women and Amazons is clear: by around 500, Athenians were vigorously scrutinizing the proper place of women in their society (Stewart 578). “Thus in Athens in the sixth and fifth centuries BCE we have a society in which democracy is evolving, art and philosophy flowering, women are utterly suppressed, and misogyny is rife – and yet in which there is a strong subliminal recognition of feminine power...” (Wilde 21). “It does not necessarily follow that all women were always merely chattels, silent, repressed and unappreciated,” says Lefkowitz (xiii).

Information about the Amazons’ life was included in a series of anecdotes by Hippokrates that explained why Asians were weaker or more effeminate than Greeks: for one thing, Asians were generally ruled by despots who ruled with absolute power at home as well as on the battlefield (Lefkowitz 4). The Athenian city government consisted of a democratic partnership of free individuals, revolutionary for its time, and this principle was at work in Greek phalanxes as well; it was this unique feature that had saved the plains of Marathon from Persian tyranny (Tyrrell 50). The Greeks scorned barbarian battle tactics. Since Homeric times the bow was reviled as a coward’s weapon because it could kill from a safe distance, and both Persians and Amazons fought with long-range bows (Tyrrell 50; Stewart 584). Archery on horseback for quick hit and run attacks was a style of warfare that suited women – hand-to-hand combat put them at a disadvantage with the more physically powerful men. This would have

incensed the Greeks who saw close quarter, hand-to-hand fighting as more masculine and honorable (Davis-Kimball 62; Tyrrell 50). Faced with archers, hoplites were vulnerable and thrown on the defensive; however, the Amazons, although women, were still seen as “redoubtable foes” (Tyrrell 51). The Greeks then, who normally saw women as delicate and submissive creatures, viewed Amazons as a tribe of militant females fully capable of engaging men in combat on horseback (Davis-Kimball 54). By association, then, the Persians were thought of in the same way as Amazons, as dishonorable cowards.

### **Historical Accounts of the Amazons’ Homeland**

So far, we have explored the myths and legends of the warrior women in Greece but what “proof” do we have of their existence? Where did they really come from? As we shall see, Amazons were far from the mythical fantasy so many writers of today would have us believe.

Ancient historians were intrigued by the mythos of the Amazons and included them in their writings. Herodotus, the man often credited as the Father of History, was born around 484 BCE in Caria, a Greek colony in Anatolia (modern-day Turkey), part of the Amazons’ eastern territories. He explored the edges of the known world, traveling through Egypt and many parts of the Greek and Persian empires, recording the history, legends and customs of the people he encountered. Adopting an early ‘scientific’ approach he interviewed people and wrote about non-Greek history. He was fascinated with the fierce steppe nomads and included tales of the Sauromatians in his accounts of the Persian

wars, whose beginnings he traced back to the Amazons (Davis-Kimball xiv, 51-53).

Diodorus, the first-century BCE historian, wrote of his travels in northern Africa and some of the Near Eastern countries, recording his observations of people along the way. He was keenly interested in cultural patterns and was certainly one of the forerunners of the fields of anthropology and sociology, recording much information about women warriors and matriarchy in the nations all about him. He did not belittle men who lived in such social systems, but rather seemed admiring and respectful of the women who wielded such power. He reported that *Æthiopian* women carried arms and practiced communal marriages (Stone 34-35). He also claimed that he was shown the graves of Amazon generals in northern and western Africa (Davis-Kimball 130-31).

Most historical traditions regarded the Amazons as a race of female warriors who lived around the Thermodon River, close by the southern Black Sea in remote Scythian territory (Baynham 115) (Fig. 13). Aeschylus (c. 525-456 BCE) reported that the Amazons had arrived there from Colchis, which he placed (incorrectly) north of the Black Sea around Lake Maeotis (which lies to the east of the Black Sea, now modern-day Georgia) (Wilke and Hurt 612; Tyrrell 56). Pliny the Younger (61-c.112 CE ) claimed that Amazons had founded Ephesus, one of the most important Ionian cities on the Aegean coast of Turkey, and erected its famous temple of Artemis, one of the seven wonders of the Ancient World (BBC n.p.; Davis-Kimball 120, 131).

There are many accounts of cities and places encompassing the Black Sea area where the Amazons supposedly lived. Greek and Roman sources variously placed the Amazons' point of origin in Æthiopia (along the Nile), North Africa (Libya), the Aegean, the Caucasus, the steppes of southern Russia, and the Black Sea coast of modern-day Turkey (Anatolia). They were rumored to be nomads who had founded a variety of outposts on the Aegean Sea including the town of Mytilene on Lesbos and the Turkish port of Smyrna; coins that advertised them as founders of cities in Asia Minor have been recovered (Davis-Kimball 120; Shapiro 114; Tyrrell 56). In the eighth century Homer placed the Amazons in the Anatolian areas of Lycia and Phrygia on the Sangarius River; he alludes to an earlier tradition of their presence along the Ionian coast and assigned names of Ionian cities to them (Wilke and Hurt 127; Tyrrell 55-56). The fourth century BCE historian Ephorus, a pupil of Isocrates, wrote a history of his native city, Cyme, in Ionia, in which he traced its founding to an Amazon (Tyrrell 43).

Although unequivocal physical evidence for the existence of the Amazons has yet to be confirmed, the ancient Greeks did not doubt their reality. In the sixth century BCE, Greeks traveled to Themiskyra, the Amazons' capital city, on the Thermodon River, on the south shore of the Black Sea in 'Pontus', the land that in seventh-century BCE epic poetry had been inhabited by Amazons. When they found no Amazons there, they did not give up their belief in their existence but, rather, thought of the Amazons as being located farther away, in the part of the world that they had not yet explored, namely the uncivilized lands of Scythia; other accounts put them in Æthiopia or places they had heard of but where no

one had actually been (Lefkowitz 7; Shapiro 114; Wilde 33). Lysias in the early fourth century suggested that the Amazons' land of origin might have been deliberately obscured by historians as punishment for their headstrong and ignoble actions (Davis-Kimball 120).

The genesis of the Amazons has always been in question. In *Histories*, Herodotus wrote about a tribe of warrior women who rode the steppes of southern Russia about a century before his time, whom the Greeks called Amazons; the Scythians called them *Oiropata* (*Oeorpata*) or “killers of men” (IV.110 (249); Davis-Kimball 53). He recited an old tale in which the Greeks had defeated the Amazons in a battle at Thermodon (now Terme in Turkey on the Black Sea's southern coast) and set sail with their captives for home. The women mutinied, tossed their captors overboard, and, untrained as sailors, ended up on northern Black Sea coast, the land of the Scythians. The two groups eventually married but never merged – the Amazons demanded and kept their fierce independence. A union of these two tribes resulted in the Sauromatians, fair-skinned, long-limbed, Caucasian nomads like the Scythians before them (IV. 110-17 (250-51); Davis-Kimball 9, 52).

Amazons then, whom the Greeks called Sauromatae, were the ancestors of Sauromatian warrior women who were still living and fighting when Herodotus wrote his account of them in the fifth century BCE; Pseudo-Hippocrates writing in the late fifth century agrees with much of his account (Wilde 40). Fierce in battle, they hunted on horseback with or without their men, wore men's clothing, and

even fought in wars; a woman in this society was not allowed to marry until she had killed an enemy man in battle (IV.116-17(251); Davis-Kimball 53; Wilde 43).

Herodotus insisted that the word *Amazon* stemmed from two Greek words meaning “without a breast” (*a* = without; *mazos* = breast). However, most modern linguists seem to agree that the word comes from a Proto Indo-European term meaning “no-husband one” (Davis-Kimball 118). As Davis-Kimball points out, there is no need for a warrior-woman to remove a breast - she can shoot a bow just fine with both and no extant artwork portrays an Amazon mutilated in this way (118).

### **Scythians**

Herodotus put his account of the Amazons into a general description of Scythia itself, “a country no part of which is cultivated, and in which there is not a single inhabited city” (IV.97 (246)), which, of course, would make sense if he is referring to a nomadic warrior society instead of a settled agricultural people. Lefkowitz called this country “...a land beyond the pale, with strange, interesting and occasionally admirable customs that are in general demonstrably inferior to those of the Greeks” (4). V.I.Guliaev has connected the Amazons with the Scythians because they shared some typical customs (114). The language of the Sauromatae was Scythian, wrote Herodotus, “but not spoken in its ancient purity, since the Amazons never learned it correctly” (IV.117 (251); Guliaev 113).

The Scythians lived in the steppe and forest steppe zones of the northern Black Sea coast, between the Danube and Don (Tanaïs) rivers, in the regions

north and east of the Black Sea and along its southern coasts (Guliaev 112).

Davis-Kimball places the Scythians northeast of the Black Sea in what is part of the modern Ukraine (50-51). Wilde believes that they were an Indo-Iranian people who arrived in the eighth-century BCE in the steppes that sweep down to the Black Sea. Some continued a nomadic life that exalted warrior skills and strengths, and in which horses played a central part, while others became more settled, growing crops and manufacturing weapons (46).

The Scythians are mentioned in the Old Testament as the Gog of Magog, “all of them riding on horses, a great horde, a mighty army...like a cloud covering the earth” which would threaten Israel (Ezek. 38.4-14 (Attridge 1151-52)).

Herodotus reported that the Scythians were nomads living north of the Black Sea who called the Amazons “man-killers” (IV.110 (249)); Tyrrell 23). Curiously, Wilde writes of an obscure third century CE Roman writer called Justin whose version is different; he suggests that the original Amazons came *from* Scythia *to* the River Thermodon and not the other way around (Wilde 43). Considering some of the archaeological evidence which will be presented later, perhaps his is the most accurate version.

The Scythians were renowned for their ferocity and the Greeks referred to them as ‘barbarians’ as they did the Amazons (Davis-Kimball 51). Herodotus described in lurid detail how Scythians cut the scalps off of their enemies’ skulls and hung them from their horses’ bridles, and how they made quivers from the skin of the right arms of their opponents. They were infamous for manufacturing drinking cups out of human skulls – some of the finest were even covered in gold

(Wilde 46). And, upon the death of a great chieftain, Herodotus tells of how the Scythians sacrificed fifty young warriors by impaling each upright onto a strangled horse, all flanking the chieftain's burial mound (Davis-Kimball 51; Richter 118).

### **The Reality of Ancient History: Amazons, Sauromatians, and Sarmatians**

The Scythians were eventually replaced by a great wave of "innumerable" Sarmatian nomadic tribes very similar to the Scythians in language and culture. They crossed the Don River at the end of the fourth century BCE and moved westward, subjugating the Scythian territories step by step, annihilating even the memory of them. Eventually they were fully absorbed into the Sarmatian culture (Guliaev 112).

Herodotus wrote that the Sauromatians, descendents of the Amazons, had lived in the area of the Don River as far southeast as the Caspian Sea, in an area east and north of the Black Sea (IV.21 (223); IV.10-112 (249-51)). Modern research has so far revealed that Sauromatian nomads lived in Russia's southern Ural steppes and along the Volga and Don (Tanaïs) rivers in the seventh and fifth centuries BCE (Davis-Kimball 9, 52; Guliaev 114) which essentially confirms Herodotus' account for their existence (Davis-Kimball 52) (Fig. 13, 14).

They were eventually succeeded by the Sarmatians (fourth century BCE - second century CE), a Caucasoid tribe of nomadic pastoralists who occupied the same Sauromatian territories (Davis-Kimball 32, 247). Russian archaeologists



defined them as “female dominated” (Davis-Kimball 12, 60). Davis-Kimball discovered that the Sauro-Sarmations in general rarely engaged in hand-to-hand combat, preferring to fight on horseback with bows and arrows, carrying three-foot swords which gave them a longer reach in battle (62), again corroborating Herodotus’ account of Amazon battle tactics.

Classical written tradition, beginning with Herodotus, firmly connected the Amazons with the region of the Don (Tanais) River, not with the Volga-Ural area, where numerous graves of Sauromatian females with weapons have been uncovered in the last few decades (Davis-Kimball 9, 11; Guliaev 114). Pseudo-Plutarch said the Tanais was known earlier as ‘the Amazon river’, because they had often bathed there. According to Guliaev, ancient writers considered the lands along the Azov Sea and the Tanais as belonging to the Scythians, but not to the Sauromatians, which in her opinion makes it “evident...that some typical customs of the Amazons must be reflected in the inhabitants of Scythia proper” (114). Modern archaeological evidence unearthed by Davis-Kimball and others has given more credence to the possibility of the actual existence of the Amazons in these areas and that female warriors may have originated in the nomadic peoples of the Eurasian steppes (120).

### **Amazon Burials and Archaeology**

Large-scale archaeological investigations in the territory of former Scythia have uncovered numerous burials containing the remains of female warriors similar to the Sauromatian ones and recent archaeological excavations of

kurgans or 'mound' burials at Pokrovka on the Russia-Kazakhstan border in 1994 by Davis-Kimball and others in Russian Central Asia (between the Caspian and Aral Seas) should add new fuel to the debate about whether Amazons ever existed, or more accurately, whether Herodotus' account (IV.110-17 (249-51)) of them has any basis in fact (Davis-Kimball xi; Guliaev 114; Stewart 573).

In the 1950's, Russian archaeologists began excavating sixth-century BCE Sauromatian kurgans (barrows) in the lower Volga and Don river regions and discovered women's graves containing weaponry, armor, and riding gear (Davis-Kimball 54). Intensive explorations of Sauromatian kurgans in those regions during the 1960's and 1970s radically changed our views on the accounts of some classical authors. "The ancient myth was suddenly verified by the proof of rich female graves containing full sets of weapons and horse trappings" says Guliaev (114). Upon the discovery of forty Oiropata-like graves in Scythia in 1980, a German archaeologist found that twenty percent of Sauromatian graves were those of females containing bows and arrows (Davis-Kimball 54).

Some scholars continued to argue that the true Amazons were just Sauromatian women because of the weapons found in the female burials in the Volga-Ural region (Guliaev 114), that is, they were only high-ranking wives of royal husbands and not women of power in their own right since graves of men and women had the same type of grave goods (Davis-Kimball 11). Wilde explains that most previous generations of archaeologists had found a way of explaining such graves that did not involve the idea that women might be buried

with their own weapons. In fact, they tended to presume that any burial with weapons would be that of a man (Wilde 47). But Russian archaeologist K. F. Smirnov, excavating Sauro-Sarmatian nomadic burial sites in the southern Ural steppes during the 1950s and 1960s, had a different opinion. Women, he said, had high status as evidenced by their burial artifacts and had had a more prominent role in their societies than was previously thought; he identified the population living in the lower Don River region in the fourth century BCE as 'Amazons' (Davis-Kimball 11, 48-49).

Numerous burials were discovered at large-scale archaeological digs to the west of the Don-Volga region in the territory of former Scythia (northern Black Sea) containing the remains of female warriors (Davis-Kimball 9, 11; Guliaev 114). Elene Fialko reported that by 1991, "archaeologists had uncovered more than 112 graves of women with weapons in the area between the Danube and Don rivers. According to anthropological sexing, about 70 percent of these interments belonged to young women aged between 16 and 30 years old" (qtd. in Guliaev 114). Davis-Kimball interprets the role of these buried women differently than her male predecessors: one woman's burial was "abundantly provided with bronze harness rings that had been used to harness the seven horses in her grave" and other offerings that were usually connected to a male burial. "It was then that I understood that women of high status were hidden by the shadows of traditional interpretations," she writes (54). What she discovered has helped change established notions of a woman's place in ancient nomadic societies and

lent credence to tales around the world of warrior women and priestesses of great power (Davis-Kimball xii).

There is much evidence, based on empirical findings of historians and archaeologists, that certain ancient women enjoyed a great deal of power and wealth within even the most warlike of tribes (Davis-Kimball 13). Greek, Persian, and Roman accounts tell of the widows of nomadic chieftains who ruled in their husbands' stead; Herodotus wrote about Tomyris, queen of the Massagetae Saka who led her tribe to victory against the Persian king Cyrus the Great in 530 BCE (I.205 (81)) and of Artemisia, a Halicarnassian queen who assumed power after the death of her husband and commanded five of her own triremes in naval battles for the Persian despot, Xerxes. According to Herodotus she gave "sounder counsel" to Xerxes than any of his other allies and was instrumental in winning a sea battle against the Athenians (VII.99 (402); VIII.87-88 (476-77)). Although factual proof of whether these famous women existed is dependent upon further archaeological revelations, the possibility that such women actually existed is tantalizing.

Sarmatians were disapprovingly referred to as 'women-ruled' by other steppe peoples most likely because women were routinely included in the councils of their tribes and worked as advisors for their leaders (Davis-Kimball 44). In fact, the Russian anthropologist Anatoly Khazanov said that there were "serious grounds" for thinking that both Sauromatians and Sarmatians were matrilineal and that matrilinearity had been preserved for a long time among the ancient nomads in the Eurasian steppes (qtd. in Davis-Kimball 44-45). Other

Russian archaeologists reported that there were female warriors and priestesses in these societies; two researchers wrote articles defining the Sauromatians as “female dominated” (Davis-Kimball 12). It became evident to Davis-Kimball that both Sarmatian and Sauromatian women “enjoyed a measure of power and prominence far beyond what previous researchers had ever imagined” (13).

Grave goods have shown that the Sauromatian females were not only brave warriors, but also held many religious and ritual functions (Guliaev 114). Extraordinary material honors were paid to these deceased women - many ritual objects as well as full sets of weapons were found in their graves, “a clear indication of the deep respect for women in Sauromatian society”, as Guliaev points out (114). An ‘Amazon’ grave found in 1884 at Cholodni Yar on the River Tiasmin contained two bodies: the main burial was of a woman; at her feet was the body of a young man. Almost all of the “fairly rich” grave goods were grouped around her; only a few items were found with him. Research concluded that the woman was a warrior of some social standing who was accompanied in the afterlife by a servant or slave. Although she had classic female accoutrements such as weaving and spinning tools, she also possessed a bow, arrowheads, knives and spears (Wilde 47-48). Another researcher, V.A. Illynskaya, determined that “In contrast with the usual Scythian Amazon female burials, the graves of women-warriors are always the principal (primary) burial inside the kurgans and not intrusive, secondary burials. Thus, the native Amazons were equal in this sense with the burials of male warriors (qtd. in Guliaev 115).

The oldest known 'Amazon' grave found in what once was ancient Colchis (now Georgia) dates from the end of the second millennium BCE; the woman had been buried in a sitting position with a short sword across her knees. A serious head wound was thought to be the result of a blow from a spearpoint or stone (Wilde 48). The life of a warrior woman was often deadly as evidenced by other bodies found in the kurgan burials. Skeletons with arrowheads lodged in various body parts have been found, including one belonging to a young woman with an arrowhead embedded in her skull (Wilde 49). Another had several wounds on her skull and a bronze arrowhead inside her knee joint (Guliaev 114-15). Several of the female skeletons in southern Siberia had broken left arm bones suggestive of battle-inflicted wounds. Davis-Kimball concluded that they had held up that limb to ward off blows while attacking with their right arm (59).

Burials of warrior women continue to be found and the remains of older burials, such as the one at Cholodni Yar, reinterpreted. We know now that many graves previously assumed to contain male warriors in fact contained women (Wilde 47-48). New research is painting an exciting new picture for us of the life of the nomadic people of the steppes, of those who may have influenced the ancient Greeks into creating the myth of the Amazon for their own use.

To date, there is still no indisputable archaeological proof of their existence. Davis-Kimball remarks that "This lack of hard proof has led many historians to speculate that tales of the Amazons may have been fabricated by the Greeks to help keep their own women in line" (121). There is, of course, the possibility that Amazons were known by other names to other peoples, such as

Sauromatian or Sarmatian, and that only the Greeks referred to them as Amazons or the 'breastless' ones, which points to their cultural biases about women in general.

### **Greek Colonization and Trade**

Perhaps clues to their existence lie with those with whom the Greeks traded. Greeks colonized the southern shores of the Black Sea from the eighth century BCE onward and reached its northern shores by the end of the seventh (Wilde 35; Boardman, *Greeks* 258); Greek goods passed through cities such as Tanais at the mouth of the Don in the very earliest days of colonization (Boardman, *Greeks* 252) (Fig. 14). The Athenian outpost at Sigeion (near Troy), located just south of the Black Sea, was on the trade route to Scythia (Shapiro 112). Athenian pottery (fifth and fourth centuries) has been found in Scythian towns far up the Dnieper River, south of Kiev, and discoveries of Attic black-figure pottery in Berezan and Theodosia (on the island peninsula of Taurica/ Crimea) in Southern Russia prove that there was contact with the Scythians in the first half of the sixth century (Boardman, *Greeks* 242-43; Shapiro 112). These trading contacts between the Scythians and Greeks are the most likely sources for reports of mounted and armed nomadic women in Asia Minor and the Black Sea regions, which were taken back to the incredulous Greeks on the Ionian coast and thence on to Athens, which would account for the popularity of their myths in mainstream Greek sensibilities (Tyrrell 23); any female warriors among these barbarians would most certainly have been objects of curiosity.

Elene Fialko proposed that these warrior women were only used as a “special, lightly armed detachment of the Scythian army” during the fifth and fourth centuries BCE (qtd. in Guliaev 115) and thus, would have been familiar sights to Greek traders, but that statement relegates them to the normative second class status that western societies have customarily accepted as reality.

Too many historians still exile the warrior women to the background as helpmates for men and not as a force unto themselves. Unfortunately, Guliaev regards the “possible” presence of armed women among the Scythians as simply an obligation to serve as auxiliary troops, trained only with “sufficient skills” to guard hearth and homestead while the men were away on military campaigns or tending to long seasonal migrations with their cattle herds. I believe that she is misreading Diodorus’ reports of women among the Scythians who, “like the men, were trained for war and...were just as brave” (qtd. in Guliaev 120-21). There is no reason to think that Scythian women were not the equals of their men in their capabilities to wage war and this may have been the most potent reason behind the myth of the *antianeirai*.

Scythians were well known in mainland Greece and beyond; mercenaries were used as ‘policemen’ in Athens and may have formed a corps of archers in her army in the mid-fifth century (Boardman, *Greeks* 256; Shapiro 112). Greeks and Scythians may have influenced the other’s art; certainly the vase-painters demonstrated their familiarity with the Scythian style of dress from close contact with them in their daily lives as well as through their many trading contacts (Wilde 46) (Fig. 14). There is evidence that colonizing Greeks not only traded with



Scythians but lived with them in the towns around the Black Sea (Richter 117; Wilde 45-56). Bel'sk is one such place. Situated out in the middle of the steppes east of Kiev is a great Scythian settlement, the largest inhabited earthwork ever discovered, covering 4,000 hectares and containing three separate villages. It flourished in the seventh century BCE and had a mixed population – half Greeks and half Scythians. In a huge cemetery are thousands of small kurgans containing skeletons in such poor condition that, as Wilde notes, it is impossible to know the sex of the warriors. She considers the possibility that all of the inhabitants were warriors (of unknown gender) because the graves are full of shields, swords and coats of mail. Bel'sk was probably some kind of a fortress, she says, “which fits in well with the ferocious reputation that the Scythians have carried throughout history” (45-46).

Wilde remarks that the Greeks and Scythians got along well together which is surprising considering how culturally different the two societies were. The Scythians were fierce primitives, vagabond horsemen who were crack shots with the bow while the Greeks were cultured students of philosophy and democracy, and more advanced technologically (Wilde 45-46; Boardman, *Greeks* 8). But, the Scythians may have accepted the presence of colonizing Greeks in their territories around the Black Sea because they had something valuable to trade – Greek craftsmen created stunning works of art in gold and bronze in the so-called ‘Animal Style’ (Boardman, *Greeks* 258-59; Davis-Kimball 10) (Fig. 15-19). Most consisted of plaques meant to decorate shields, bow casings, scabbards, clothing or horses’ harnesses (Fig. 20). Archaic casting

molds for these plaques have been found in excavations in many areas around the Black Sea, such as on the island of Berezan (on the northern tip) and in the North Pontic region that runs along its southern coast (Treister 182). Based on analysis of sixth and fifth century casting molds, at least some of the motifs of the Scythian 'Animal Style' were known and produced by Greek craftsmen working in early Greek settlements of the North Pontic area (southern Black Sea).

Boardman says that the Scythians probably did not learn their style from the Greeks but that both groups played a major role in the development of this distinctive artistic style which has been found as far away as Ephesus in western Anatolia (*Greeks*, 257; Treister 189-9).

The wealth of both the Scythians and the Black Sea trade attracted some of the finest Ionian artists to the northern colonies, where they adapted their natural style to the tastes and styles of the Scythians (Boardman, *Greeks* 259). The Greeks were not serving an ordinary barbarian market – Scythians, particularly their nobility, were used to the most accomplished works of decorative art (Boardman, *Greeks* 258-59; Treister 182; Richter 120). It is interesting that some of the Greek artisans' finest pieces seem to have been made for the Persian market as well. "There is a great deal here which looks back to the art of Persia...but there is much too which is not entirely foreign to Greek art" remarks Boardman (*Greeks* 257-59).

The Scythian 'Animal Style' consisted primarily of animals contorted gracefully into curvilinear patterns, legs folded underneath their bodies; snow leopards, large cats, deer, elk, bears, wild boar and horses all share a motif of

twisted-upward hindquarters and/or heads turned onto their backs (Boardman, *Greeks* 257; Davis-Kimball 100) (Fig. 21). Treister tells us that the motif of a reclining ibex with its head turned back “is well represented on the various objects from the Scythians barrows of the late 7<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE”; a series of bronze and ivory plaques in this pose was found in Asia Minor (184-85) (Fig 22). The same motif, found in a heraldic scheme, appears on a gold scabbard found in a barrow near the village of Shumeiko, dated late sixth or early fifth century (Fig. 24). The style and pose of the deer are slightly reminiscent of the plaque decorating the sword scabbard from the barrow near the village of Urus-Martan” (Treister 181-85; also Richter 116).

A typical feature of Scythian Animal Style - the realistic reproduction of some details of the animal and stylization of others - demonstrates the strong influence of art that was manufactured in the Greek workshops which dotted the Black Sea. According to Treister, “...we now have clear evidence that the richly decorated details of scabbards of the Kelermess type used by the Scythian nobility were made in the early workshops of (Greek settled) Panticapaeum” on the isthmus between the Azov and Black Seas (Treister 181-85; also Richter 116).

The Scythians of the South Russian steppes were originally nomadic tribes thought to come from the east, who had come to settle in the plains and by the rivers. From the new Greek cities they acquired a taste for ‘civilized’ life and “the trappings of urban civilization – wine and works of art.” Greeks and Scythians may also have been brought together by “shared antagonism to the

growing strength of the Persians, although the Scythians themselves should have found much in common with them..." says Boardman, who further tells us that there is certainly much Persian in Scythian culture and names: "Their dress...came to be standard uniform for archers, orientals, and Amazons in Greek art..." (*Greeks* 256-259).

It is during the sixth century when we begin to find the clearest indications of the impact of Greek art on the Scythians, and it is during this period when images of Amazons appear in force on Greek pottery. Many artistic renderings show Amazons riding or taming horses; the Louvre epinetron, mentioned earlier, shows an Amazon riding one of two horses (Davis-Kimball 113) (Fig. 23).

Shapiro tells us that by the 520's Amazon archers were increasingly popular and some had been assimilated into the full Scythian type, including the stiff leather cap with long flaps over the cheeks and down the back, patterned trousers, and jacket (111). It is a very short leap indeed to connect the Amazons to the modern descendants of the nomadic Scythian tribes from the prevalence of images of them with horses as depicted on sixth and fifth century Greek pottery.

### **Amazons, Nomads and Horses**

Amazons are often associated with horses – three legendary Amazon queens, Lysippe, Melanippe and Hippolyta, all have the word *hippos* in them which means 'horse' (Wilde 105; Guliaev 113). According to Lysias the Amazons were the first to ride horses. Rhodius referred to the herds of horses they kept, partly for sacrifice (Wilde 105). The horse was central to the nomadic way of life

and there are many legends about the close Amazon connections to it. In written records they are described not only as brave warriors but as skilled equestrians (Guliaev 113). Wilde surmises that “if they were part of the first or early waves of horse-pastoralist people coming from the steppes, via the southern shore of the Black Sea, they may have been nomadic or semi-nomadic women (such as those whose graves were found in the Ukrainian steppe) who were good horsewomen and practiced rites in which horses were sacrificed (105).

Apollonius Rhodius, who wrote about Jason and the Argonauts in the third century BCE, associated the Amazons with the worship of Ares, whose name is synonymous with war and bloodshed (Wilde 21; Gantz 78). Rhodius spoke about a black sacrificial stone altar on which the Amazons “used to slay horses which they kept in great herds” (qtd. in Wilde 21). Black stone, normally associated with the great goddess Cybele from Phrygia in western Anatolia, and horse-sacrifices links the Amazons with the horse people of the Steppes (Wilde 21).

A few of the kurgan burials included bridles, parts of horses, and even entire animals if the warrior was of very high rank (Wilde 48; Davis-Kimball 72). Renate Rolle spoke of an ‘Amazon’ grave from the sixth century BCE; the woman was buried in a gold-studded cap and had a servant and a horse buried with her, both probably ritually killed to accompany her in the afterlife. She seemed to have died from a blow, the trace of which remained over her right brow (qtd. in Wilde 48).

Horses are as important to the steppe nomads today as they were in past centuries. During her research Davis-Kimball observed how modern nomadic women are trained to the saddle from an extremely early age. Boys and girls as young as one learn to ride by sitting in the saddle in front of their parents. By the time they are three or so they have become proficient riders. She believes that ancient nomadic girls were most likely given military instruction by skilled mentors. "Girls who demonstrated exceptional ability would have been designated as warriors and slated to receive more extensive instruction..." (61-62). Historically, nomadic women were required to defend themselves and their herds while the men were away fighting or hunting (Wilde 51) so it is no surprise that so many burials of females with non-ritual weapons have been found.

Modern nomads are traditionally egalitarian – men, women, and children work side by side, often at the same tasks with little of the type of role playing that is often associated with patriarchal cultures. In modern societies, men may be absent for long periods of time taking care of far-flung herds or trading at distant outposts; women are prepared and quite able to take on all the tasks involved in running their family groups. Girls as well as boys learn very early how to ride and round up the herds. Men cook and take care of babies as easily as do the women. Politically, leaders tend to be men, although women are frequently chosen as chieftains; only the most adept are asked to lead. Tribal decisions are made by consensus and every adult member has some say in the manner in which they are governed. Division of labor into strict roles could impede their work and jeopardize the welfare of the tribe (Davis-Kimball 36-42).

For millennia horses have served as pack and riding animals and were kept as “dinner on the hoof” in the much same way as cattle and sheep. They have allowed armies to travel faster and were effective weapons in warfare in their own right, terrifying enemy foot soldiers and creating chaos in the midst of battles. Horses represent elemental power and our mastery over it; controlling such an animal gives its rider almost god-like power over the brute forces of the animal world and by association, with the world of men. Horses were an essential part of nomadic life and riding them gave women an autonomy that was unique for women in the Greek world (Pomeroy, *Spartan* 21). Riding horses requires skill rather than brute strength, which makes them easily accessible to both sexes. Spartan women, unlike their Athenian sisters, were known for breeding and racing fine horses; even Plato suggested that women should be trained to ride (Pomeroy, *Spartan* 19).

The possession of horses has always been seen as a status symbol (Boardman, *Parthenon* 14); as such, they have traditionally been equated with freedom. The Greeks, and especially the Trojans, were known to have bred fine horses. The Iliad describes Hector as the “tamer of horses” (Homer, Book 24: 961 (272)) and as mentioned earlier, some pottery shows Amazons taming horses. From the eighth century on, owning horses was a sign of status, of conspicuous expenditure, and of power. Images of them on Greek pottery sent a message of wealth and power; small figurines or statuettes that appeared in the ninth and eighth centuries were more often of horses than of anything else (Osborne 24). In offering them to the gods, worshippers were making a

statement of their own power and prestige. Robin Osborne explains that “In dedicating in miniature a gift whose real-life equivalent would both acknowledge and grant power, the worshipper lays claim to the type of person who deserves the prosperity that allows horse ownership and the power that stems from it. Power can be imaged by animals of various kinds, by virtue of their wildness or their vital role in human survival; but the power of the horse is essentially a social construct” (27). Horses helped and still help to create social constructs and establish systems of social ranking; simply owning one puts its owner a step ahead of his neighbor.

The horse may represent freedom for the Amazon, but they represented much more to the Greek male: “The untamed horse had long symbolized male sexuality on the loose,” says Stewart (580), thus, the image of women taming horses became a metaphor for women taming and confining men, a thing with which no Greek of the sixth or fifth century would have been comfortable.

### **A Question of Reality**

Were there ever Amazons? According to Tyrrell, “Most Greeks believed that they existed at one time, and the report of their attack on Athens appears ancient. There is, in fact, no way historically to deny their existence and no way to prove it. The evidence from classical Athens, as we have seen, bears witness to the myth, not to Amazons *qua* Amazons...It is possible that the myth began with reality. Stories of mounted and armed nomad women could have been



brought from the hinterlands of Asia Minor and the Black Sea to the Greeks on the Ionian coast and on to Athens” (Tyrrell 23).

Although myths contained an historical core, wrote first-century Greek geographer Strabo, he nevertheless called them “ancient, deceitful and monstrous,” but history, he said, aimed at the truth. However, he refused to believe that it was possible, in fact it was inconceivable that “an army or city or nation of women could be organized without men” (Davies, et al 76; Tyrrell 44). For centuries, the tales of fiercely independent women warriors was considered the stuff of legend, not history (Davis-Kimball 54) and most historians discounted the truth of the Amazons’ existence. Respected scholars have made sweeping statements flatly denying their reality, such as the following: “...there is no way, through modern historical methods, to affirm or deny the Amazons’ existence, since the evidence we have pertains only to myth...” (Tyrrell xiii). “The existence of the Amazons,” says Tyrrell, “remains moot” (xiii). One professor of prehistoric archaeology rejected the idea that reindeer skulls were the hunting trophies of a Paleolithic tribe because they were found in the grave of a woman (Stone xxi), yet we know now that there is not just a possibility of ancient women warriors the Greeks called ‘Amazons’, there is a strong probability that they existed, based on archaeological evidence.

What has been found in the kurgan graves of the steppes is only a small piece of a huge cultural puzzle. It will take more than the few graves unearthed so far to prove that the Amazons actually existed, but so far there has been no

proof that they did not exist. I believe that Guliaev agrees this premise in her observations about the Sauromatians:

At first sight this description of militant Sauromatian women seems rather fantastic or improbable. As a result, the legend of the origins of the Sauromatian people was unpopular among scholars for a long time. However, intensive explorations of their kurgans in the Volga and Ural regions during the 1960s and 1970s radically changed our views on the tales of some classical authors. The ancient myth was suddenly verified by the proof of rich female graves containing full sets of weapons and horse trappings (114).

Guliaev states that archaeological finds in the Lower Don (Tanais) correspond with classical written tradition under its old name as the “Land of the Amazons.” Amazons were originally Scythians, not merely the ‘mythical’ Sauromatians, and she concludes unequivocally that, based on the high social status of the female Scythian burials, including “the remains of the fabulous treasures...these women were, according to all indications, the true Amazons of the classical written tradition” (119-20).

Tantalizing words but we must maintain a sense of equilibrium. It may be unlikely that a race of women who exactly mirrored Herodotus’ description ever existed but components of the Amazonian myths have existed in many different times and places (Davis-Kimball 121). In Lefkowitz’s view “...the discovery of fourth-century Sauromatian graves containing the skeletons of women and horses, with spears, may indicate that there were women warriors, but not that these women were independent of man, like the Amazons, or indeed matriarchal” (8). It may be difficult to prove absolutely that a society of *Oiropata* existed, but I doubt that it will prove impossible. Considering the modern advances in technology and archaeological techniques, the world will be unable to ignore

forever the reality of warrior women who lived in ancient societies profoundly different from our own. It is no longer unrealistic to connect the fabled Amazons to the ferocious women of the Scythian, Sauromatian and Sarmatian tribes.

### **Conclusion**

The use of Amazons in Athenian art was a potent reminder to women, as well as to men, that their duties lay in preserving their homeland, their way of life, and especially in cultivating Greek identity (Hurwit 169). Whether actual or symbolic, warrior-women who were unwilling to accept their designated, dominated places in Athenian society posed a threat to that society and had to be portrayed as the antithesis of the idealized, masculine way of life. Women were a necessary evil in their world, essential because the Goddess Athena had declared it by Her presence but relegated to the shadows of their society. Vigilance against the dark, feminine forces was necessary or women would overcome them, destroying their Goddess-sanctioned society.

Even in what we consider misogynistic or patriarchal cultures there is an undercurrent of the strong woman, a being that men fear because the shadow of her strength is always there, threatening to overpower their idyllic and fragile superstructure. Men cannot survive without woman; even when they try to suppress the very idea of her, banishing her to the shadows; woman is there waiting, like a sleeping tiger. Amazons, whether myth or reality, represented a very real threat to their “men only” club; they respected strong women while at the same time decrying their temerity and audacity.

Plato proposed that self-control, courage, and justice were the same for women as for men (Lefkowitz 147). As Giulia Sissa observes, “for Plato the human race is not...divided into two distinct groups whose faculties and functions stand in sharp contrast. Such division is to be avoided. Instead, humans are seen as individuals, endowed with certain personal aptitudes that have nothing to do with gender” (59). There are no hard and fast rules for how any society should be ruled and there are no rational reasons why women are incapable of swinging a sword or pulling back a bowstring. The only factors that prevent the majority of women from becoming warriors are their physical strength, training and personal ability, otherwise, women can and should be considered equals with men, even on the fields of battle. Savagery and killing instincts (sad to say) are not the sole domain of men.

Unfortunately, J.J. Bachofen’s theory of the “inexorable advance of patriarchy (which) roused the priestesses of the Goddess to become warrior Amazons” has survived unscathed (qtd. in Stewart 572). Modern societies have not relinquished the myth of the brutish, militant Amazon and until further research is unearthed, are not likely to. The image of the Amazon is adaptable, adjusting to “changing historical and social circumstances in both ancient and modern uses” (Langdon 1). In mythology Amazons are reduced to a mere symbol and so, by extension, are all women.

The Greeks appear to have focused on their masculinity almost to the point of hysteria. They could not deal with the female ‘other’, with the natural power of woman, so women became an inconvenience to them. Labels such as

'barbarian', 'woman', or 'slave', keeps people in their place and at arms length. Knowing what to do or how to deal with the 'other', with the stranger in your midst, may seem safer but it's not that simple. It is easier to deal with others when we adopt an "us versus them" mentality; labeling people helps to keep them at a distance. The Athenian Greeks' blind insistence on seeing the world as they wished it to be rather than as it really was only created deeper conflicts, and we are still dealing with them today. I have always been a bit puzzled and dismayed at the obvious misogyny of researchers who refuse to believe the evidence before their eyes, that the burial of a warrior "always" belongs to a man and rarely to a woman. Only in recent times has the pendulum swung toward parity.

In my search for the real Amazons I discovered much more than a myth of bellicose females in rebellion against the male world; I discovered an unimagined realm of strong and self-reliant women who held their own in a sometimes brutal and savage world. Men have nothing to fear from the reality behind the myth of the Amazon, and in truth, they have everything to gain from accepting their sisters as full partners equal to the challenges of life. We are not an inconvenience, and never should have been considered as such. If anything, it is time to lay aside the myth of patriarchy.

True freedom lies in the equality of all of its citizens, based upon an abiding respect for each other's ideas, opinions and rights – hopefully, the civilization of the future and one I may actually witness. But, considering the reluctance of the world to admit women into its largely male-dominated ranks, I

may not live long enough to realize this dream. One can only hope that humans have matured enough in the past 4000 years to recognize that the richness of our combined cultural past can only enhance our collective future.

As Merlin Stone observed, "The ancient past is not so far removed as we might imagine or prefer to believe" (xv). If history can teach us anything at all, then we should be glad to know of other cultures that did not see women as natural inferiors to their brothers. Jeannine Davis-Kimball regards warrior women as the underlying foundation that held ancient societies together. "They are our heritage, our role models. They deserve to come out of the shadows of history and be celebrated!" (240). With further research and open minds, they will.

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