The fierce Amazons were more than just a myth—they were real

Archaeology is revealing that the real Amazons were horse-riding, spear-throwing, pants-wearing fearsome female fighters from ancient Scythia.

The Amazons of Greek mythology, were fierce warrior women dwelling in the lands around and beyond the Black Sea. The greatest Greek heroes proved their valor by overcoming formidable Amazon queens in several famous myths. In one, Theseus, mythic founder of Athens, fought and defeated the Amazon Antiope. Heracles set out on his ninth labor with orders to obtain the war belt of the Amazon queen Hippolyte. In the legendary Trojan War, the champion Greek warrior Achilles and the bold Amazon Penthesilea were locked in hand-to-hand combat on the battlefield. (The ancient city of Troy was thought to be lost or legendary, but archaeologists found it.)

Known to the Greeks as the "equals of men," the Amazons were said to be as courageous and skilled in war as men. In Greek art and literature, Amazons were invariably depicted as brave and beautiful, but always armed and dangerous. By the time Homer wrote The
The Iliad (around 700 B.C.), every Greek man, woman, boy, and girl knew exciting Amazon tales.

Greek artists created myriad images of Amazons wearing pants, riding horses, shooting bows, swinging battle-axes, hurling spears, and fighting and dying heroically. Amazons were popular subjects on privately commissioned pottery as well as on public sculptures. Vivid scenes of women warriors in battle decorated buildings and temples. To the lover of Greek myths, the Amazons might seem as imaginary as the hydra or Pegasus, but archaeologists are finding compelling evidence for the existence of ancient warrior women.

Eastern origins

Recent archaeological discoveries of graves from the fifth century B.C. suggest that the Greeks’ tales of Amazons were influenced by the lives of real equestrian nomads of Eurasia. In the Greek myths, Amazons enjoyed a vigorous outdoor life, sexual freedom, hunting, and warfare. Notably, these same characteristics could be observed among the peoples that roamed Scythia, the ancient Greek name for the vast territory stretching from the Black Sea east to Mongolia.

The Scythians who occupied these lands were nomads, who appear as early as the ninth century B.C. Their culture spread across Asia, from the lands of Ukraine to those of Siberia. The Greeks first encountered Scythians, whose lives centered on horse riding and archery, in the seventh century B.C. when Greeks began to establish colonies around the Black Sea.

As Greek knowledge of Scythia expanded, descriptions and images of Amazons in art and literature took on more realistic details, reflecting the actual customs and attire of steppe nomads, including their horses and weapons. By about 450 B.C., Herodotus and other writers were describing how women of Scythia fought alongside men on horseback, like the Amazons of myth. Ancient Greek and Roman historians reported that Cyrus of Persia, Alexander the Great, and Rome’s general Pompey encountered Amazon-like women in eastern lands.

The archaeological evidence from Scythian graves reveals a level of sexual equality that would have astonished the Greeks. In Greece, wives and daughters were usually kept indoors weaving and minding children. In contrast, the nomadic horsemen and women lived a rugged life in a harsh landscape. The tribes were always on the move, finding new pastures for horses, hunting, raiding, and battling hostile tribes. Every member, male and female, young and old, contributed to defending the group and ensuring survival. It was not only logical but necessary to train the girls as well as the boys to ride, shoot arrows, hunt, and fight. This lifestyle encouraged equality. For the nomads, the great equalizer for women was the crucial combination of horses with archery. Astride a fast horse, a woman...
with a bow is as deadly as a man. (These ancient golden Scythian vessels were part of used drug-fueled rituals.)

The egalitarian lifestyle of the Scythians was very different from the settled, agricultural lifestyle of the Greeks. The fact that women could be the equals of men aroused ambivalence. The idea was both exhilarating and daunting, inspiring an outpouring of thrilling stories about barbarian women who were as brave and skilled in war as men. In their myths about the bold Amazons, it seems that the Greeks allowed themselves a secure space to explore the idea of equality between the sexes, an impossible dream in their own paternalistic society where men dominated and controlled women.

FROM THE BATTLE TO THE GRAVE

A sixth-century B.C. plate painted in the Attic style by Epictetus depicts an Amazon or female Scythian archer.

BRITISH MUSEUM/SCALA, FLORENCE

In the 1940s archaeologists studying Scythian sites in Ukraine, south Russia, Caucasia, and Central Asia excavated grave mounds called kurgans. When they found human remains accompanied by weapons, they assumed the deceased must be male. The advent of DNA-testing has proven those assumptions wrong. About 300 skeletons, some battle-scarred, have been identified as female; like Scythian men, these women were buried with their quivers of arrows, battle-axes, spears, and horses. Further studies of Scythian culture
revealed an egalitarian way of life. As part of a nomadic tribe of mounted archers, all the children—both sons and daughters—would be taught to ride horses and shoot arrows from a young age. Regardless of gender, Scythians donned similar clothing too. Everyone dressed in tunics and pants, making it easier for all people to hunt and ride.

Bones and burials

Scientific advances in the study of human remains have deepened the study of the Scythians and revealed a much more nuanced view of their culture and burial practices. Early excavations of Scythian burial mounds, known as kurgans, in the 1940s revealed skeletons buried with spears, axes, arrows, and horses. These remains were previously identified as male, but decades later the advent of DNA-testing has revealed that not all the remains belonged to men. Many of them were women. (Scythian women also covered their skin in tattoos.)

Like Scythian mounted archers, Amazons were depicted riding and wielding bows. This fifth-century B.C. Etruscan bronze Amazon is executing a Parthian shot (turning the body to fire an arrow at a pursuer). British Museum, London BRITISH MUSEUM/SCALA, FLORENCE

About one-third of Scythian women found in burials to date have been discovered with weapons. Their bones bear the marks of combat injuries: slashed ribs, fractured skulls, and broken arms. In 2017 archaeologists found a female skeleton in Armenia with an arrowhead in her femur, and evidence of other injuries consistent with warfare. (Greek pottery reveals the real names of Scythian warrior women.)

Recent discoveries have further strengthened the theory that female warriors among Scythian and other steppe cultures played a role in the Greek myths of Amazons. In late 2019 archaeologists working in the Voronezh province of Russia discovered a tomb containing the bodies of four women. The youngest was in her early teens, and the oldest in her mid-to late 40s. The oldest was buried with weapons and an elaborate headdress. Another woman, in her 20s, was buried in the position of a horse rider. Analysis suggests the remains are those of people who lived in the fourth century B.C. The site in western Russia is within the territory where Greeks could have encountered Scythians.
The new finds debunk older theories as to how the stories of Amazons arose in Greek culture. One theory proposed that imagination alone brought Amazons into existence just so they could be killed off by Greek heroes. Others insisted that the myths display a hatred and fear of women, who must be crushed by men. In this old argument, Amazons only existed in myth to be defeated, and heroic warrior status was impossible for women.

It is true that in Greek myths, the foreign Amazons were always defeated by Greek heroes—after all, Greeks wanted to hear stories about their champions as ultimate victors. But in every myth, the Amazons were portrayed as the heroes’ match in valor and prowess. Heroes seeking glory need powerful adversaries to overcome. There would be no honor in killing a weak foe. Accordingly, Greek vase paintings of the battles with Amazons are filled with suspense. The Amazons fight and die courageously, and some even kill Greek warriors.

**AMAZON ARCHAEOLOGY**

A Scythian female skull was still adorned with a ceremonial headdress (calathos) when found in Voronezh, Western Russia.
Evidence that genuine warrior women existed in the regions where ancient Greeks located the Amazons has been mounting for years. In late 2019 researchers from Russia’s Institute of Archaeology made a landmark discovery in the Voronezh province in western Russia: a burial containing four female Scythian fighters, ranging in age from about 13 to late 40s, who fought, lived, and died on the steppe of western Russia some 2,300 years ago. Parts of the tomb had been looted, but the burials of two women were intact. One appeared to have died in her mid-20s. Her body was buried with her legs bowed, in the position of a horsewoman, with two spears alongside. Also intact was the body of the oldest woman, whose skull still was adorned with a ceremonial headdress known as a calathos. The burials of 11 other armed women dating to the same era have been found in the region in the past decade. Each one has borne signs of having received the same funerary rites as men.

Facts and fictions

Just as archaeology has shown that Amazons were not pure fantasy, other mistaken ideas about Amazons can also be discarded. One of the most famous “customs” of the Amazons was that they supposedly cut off one breast in order to be able to draw a bow, a fake “fact” that has been perpetuated for more than 2,500 years.

The claim first emerged in 490 B.C., when the patriotic Greek historian Hellanicus tried to fabricate a Greek meaning for the foreign word Amazon. “Amazon” was not a Greek term, but “mazon” sounded something like the word for breast and a meant “without” in Greek. So Hellanicus proposed that the name meant that Amazons removed a breast so they could draw a bow. Not only was his claim rejected by other Greeks of his own day, but no ancient artist ever accepted the notion. All Amazons in Greek and Roman art appear with both breasts intact. And in practice, female archers are not hindered by their breasts.

Another persistent belief broadcast by the ancient Greeks was that Amazons were a tribe of man-hating, domineering women who enslaved men and mutilated, killed, or rejected baby boys. This idea likely arose because Greek men oppressed their own women. By their logic, if women were strong and independent, then the men must be weaklings forced into submission. Some sources, however, extoll the Amazons: Homer used a term for Amazons that translates as “the equals of men.” And many Greek poets called the warrior women “man-lovers.”

Some modern scholars suggest that Amazons were women who gave up motherhood in order to become warriors. This notion is undermined by the Greek lists of Amazon generations, all traced by matrilineal lines. Moreover, the Greeks described the warlike Amazons nourishing their babies with mares’ milk. The “no Amazon mothers” fallacy is further disproved by the graves of nomadic horsewomen-archers whose real lives inspired the Greek Amazon stories 2,500 years ago. Next to the skeletons of female warriors
buried with their weapons, archaeologists have discovered infants and children. Warrior women were definitely also mothers.

Finally, many modern scholars assume that Amazons were a purely Greek invention. But research reveals that the warrior women of the vast steppes of Central Asia also influenced other ancient cultures who came in contact with Scythian nomads. Adventurous tales and historical accounts of Amazon-like warrior women appeared in Egypt, Persia, Caucasia, Central Asia, India, and even China.

**WOUNDED WARRIORS**

Wounded Amazon. Copy of a sculpture by the fifth-century B.C. sculpture Kresilas. Vatican Museums

**SCALA, FLORENCE**

The Greeks surrounded themselves with images of powerful Amazons in battle scenes on painted pottery and temple friezes, but the "Wounded Amazon" figures were also popular with sculptors. "Wounded Amazon" depict an injured female warrior who has retreated from battle. In the example shown above, her quiver hangs useless under one arm. Her chiton, fastened at one shoulder, falls, exposing both breasts. Her expression betrays no pain, which would likely have impressed Greeks for its stoicism.

Egalitarian ideals

Study of Greek literature from the classical period further supports the idea that Amazons were based in part on real people. The fifth-century B.C. historian Herodotus, the first-century B.C. geographer Strabo, and others had no doubt that Amazon-like women really existed, and associated them with the flesh-and-blood warrior women of Scythia. In his *Histories*, Herodotus explained how a group of shipwrecked Amazons take local male Scythians as lovers. The Scythian men propose that the Amazons become their wives and return with them to the lands of their fathers. The women reply:

*We should not be able to live with your women, for we and they have not the same customs. We shoot with bows and hurl javelins and ride horses . . . whereas your women do none of these . . . We therefore should not be able to live in agreement with them: but*
if you desire to keep us for your wives and to be thought honest men, go to your parents and obtain from them your share of the goods, and then let us go and dwell by ourselves.

The Scythian men accept the Amazons’ offer. They relocate together to new lands where the Amazons can continue their traditions alongside their new partners. Herodotus’s presentation of the Amazons reveals a balanced look at these independent women.

TALES OF WARRIOR QUEENS
ANTIOPE AND THESEUS

Theseus, the mythical founder of Athens, sails to the country of the Amazons with his friend Pirithous. The Amazons, led by Queen Antiope, come bearing gifts to meet them. When Antiope boards the ship, Theseus abducts her and takes her back to Athens. The Amazons then attack the city; Antiope, now married to Theseus, fights alongside her husband. She is eventually killed by an arrow fired by one of her former compatriots. BRIDGEMAN/ACI

PENThesilea AND ACII

Amazon queen Penthesilea appears in the circa seventh-century B.C. work Aethiopis as an ally of the Trojans in their war against the Greeks. Mounted on her swift horse, Penthesilea faces the Greek champion Achilles in combat. Achilles is victorious and kills the Amazon queen with his spear. When he observes Penthesilea’s lifeless body, he is moved by her beauty and lets the Trojans honor her with funerary rituals worthy of a man. ALAMY/CORDON PRESS

Plato and Amazons

Another figure who wrote about the Amazons was the philosopher Plato. Amazons and Scythian women figure in his Laws, a dialogue about the best ways to raise citizens to be prepared for both peace and war. In an ideal state, Plato proposes that at age six, boys and girls “should have lessons in horse riding, archery, javelin-throwing, and slinging.” Notably, these military activities are not the typical martial skills of traditional Greek soldiers. Instead, these lessons mirror the expertise of mounted nomad archers of Scythia, a place that in the time of Plato—the fourth century B.C.—was notorious for warlike women who rode to battle alongside the men. Plato compares these real Scythians with the Amazons of tradition to help frame his argument that the ideal education would be based upon a similar notion of equality:

I say further, without hesitation, that the same education in riding and gymnastics shall be given both to men and women. The ancient tradition about the Amazons confirms my view.

Plato specifies that foreign teachers would be assigned to instruct the children to ride and shoot arrows in wide-open spaces created for the purpose. Ensuring that girls are “trained in precisely the same way as the boys” in athletics, riding horses, and wielding weapons would mean that, in an emergency, Greek women could “take up bows and arrows like Amazons, and join the men” in battle against enemies.

Plato’s radical departure from traditional Greek gender roles was not only justified by the ancient stories of Amazons. The philosopher declares that we “now know for certain that there are countless numbers of women . . . around the Black Sea who ride horses and use the bow and other weapons” just like the men. In their culture, Plato continues, “men and women have an equal duty to cultivate these skills.” Together, the men and the women join to pursue “a common purpose and throw all their energies into the same activities.”
This sort of mutual cooperation and equal training, Plato affirms, are essential to a society’s success. Indeed, he calls any state that does otherwise “foolish” because without women’s participation “a state develops only half its potential” when at the same cost and effort it could “double its achievement.” Plato likens this all-inclusive, egalitarian approach to the famous Scythian archers’ ability to shoot arrows with either the right or left hand. Such ambidexterity is crucial in fighting with bows and spears, and “every boy and girl should grow up versatile in the use of both hands.”

Scythian women, declared Plato, proved that it is possible and advantageous for a state to decide that “in education and everything else, females should be on the same footing as males and follow the same way of life as the men.”

Two Amazons defeat a male soldier in this detail, which appears on the fourth-century B.C. Sarcophagus of the Amazons. National Archaeological Museum of Florence.

Dream of equality

The idea that women could really be the equals of men may have been unsettling to the ancient Greeks, but the idea was one they loved to contemplate in myth, art, theater, and philosophy. Notably, egalitarian democratic ideals were born in ancient Athens and playwrights featured strong, independent women in many popular plays. The myriad myths about Amazons gave Greek men and women a way to imagine equality between the sexes.

In their myths and in their “thought experiments,” the Greeks wove imaginative storytelling with facts to create a panoramic world of Amazons, a world that still fascinates today. Many modern female heroes draw heavily upon the traits of Amazons of Greek mythology. Katniss Everdeen, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, and Princess Leia are all beneficiaries. Perhaps the most direct descendent of all is Wonder Woman, who is imagined as an Amazon bestowed with gifts and strengths from the Greek gods.

The eternal struggle to find harmony and balance between men and women seems to lie at the heart of most Amazon tales. It’s a timeless, universal tension. Their stories continue to suggest the possibility of egalitarian gender relationships. If it could happen in the past, it’s not impossible now.

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