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This book is dedicated to my goddaughter Sage, maker of beautiful knives, and to the memory of Sunny, another blonde, tattooed Amazon spirit. Josiah Ober, steadfast companion, this description of an ideal nomadic pair from antiquity expresses what's in my heart: "Wherever they roamed, they were always at home when they were together."

PROLOGUE

ATALANTA, THE GREEK AMAZON

KING IASOS WANTED ONLY SONS. HE LEFT HIS INFANT daughter to die on a mountainside in Arcadia, the rugged highlands of southern Greece. A mother bear nursed the abandoned baby. Hunters found the feral girl and named her Atalanta. Like a female Tarzan, Atalanta was a natural athlete and hunter. Self-reliant, with a "fierce, masculine gaze," she wrestled like a bear and could outrun any animal or man. Atalanta loved wrestling and she was strong enough to defeat the hero Peleus in a grappling contest. This bold tomboy of Greek myth was happiest roaming alone in the forest with her bow and spear. Life in the wilderness held dangers. But when a pair of malicious Centaurs tried to rape Atalanta, she killed them with her arrows.

Because of her bravery and prowess, Atalanta was the only woman invited to join the mythic expedition to destroy the terrible Calydonian Boar. In the myth, a monstrous boar had been sent by the goddess Artemis to ravage southern Greece. To slay the rampaging beast, Meleager gathered more than a dozen prominent Greek heroes, including Jason and Telemon of the Argonauts, Athens's founding king Theseus, Atalanta's wrestling partner Peleus, and Atalanta herself. Whoever killed the giant boar would win its head and hide. As the sole female, Atalanta, by her very presence, ignited strong emotions among the male heroes. Some of the men refused to participate if Atalanta came along. But Meleager, who was in love with Atalanta, compelled them all to set out together.

The hunters ran into trouble from the start. The ferocious boar gored and killed several of the men and hounds. In the mayhem, some hunters were accidentally slain by their fellows. Atalanta proved to be more courageous and skilled than any of the men; only Meleager was her equal. Atalanta was the first to wound the boar. Then Meleager rushed up and dispatched it with his spear. He presented the boar's hide and head to Atalanta, since she had drawn the first blood.

The hunting party was still in turmoil after the kill. Meleager's uncles shouted that it was a disgrace for a woman to have the prize. They seized the boar's hide from Atalanta. A fight erupted. In the uproar Meleager killed his own kinsmen and again presented the boar trophies to Atalanta. She dedicated the boar's huge tusks, head, and hide in the temple at Tegea, her birthplace. Meanwhile, her lover Meleager died as a result of the family feud that raged on after the expedition. Atalanta gave Jason a special "far-flying" spear and volunteered to sail with the Argonauts across the Black Sea on the quest for the Golden Fleece. But Jason denied her request for fear of discord among the male crew.¹

After proving her heroism in the great boar hunt, Atalanta was reunited with her biological parents. Her father, the king, was now very proud of her but could not tolerate his daughter's unwed state. He insisted that she marry. Aghast at the idea of giving up her freedom, Atalanta demanded a high-stakes contest. She would wed only the man who could defeat her in a footrace. She would give each suitor a head start. But she would kill with her spear every man who lost the race. The headstrong huntress designed the race as a hunt for human prey, but it is significant that the contest also held out the enticing possibility of finding a man who was worthy of her. True to her name, ancient Greek for "balance, equal," Atalanta desired an egalitarian relationship—and so did her hopeful suitors.

The athletic, radiant Atalanta was so desirable that even though the penalty was instant death, many young men eagerly lined up to race her. Many lost their lives. Finally a youth named Hippomenes, realizing he could never outrun Atalanta in a fair race, asked Aphrodite to help him win by trickery. The goddess of love gave him three golden apples, magically irresistible. During their race, Hippomenes dropped the apples one by one to distract Atalanta. She stopped to pick up the first two apples but was able to recover her pace. The third apple and a great burst

of speed gave the youth his victory. Atalanta was a man-killer but she was not a man-hater. She consented to be Hippomenes's mate.²

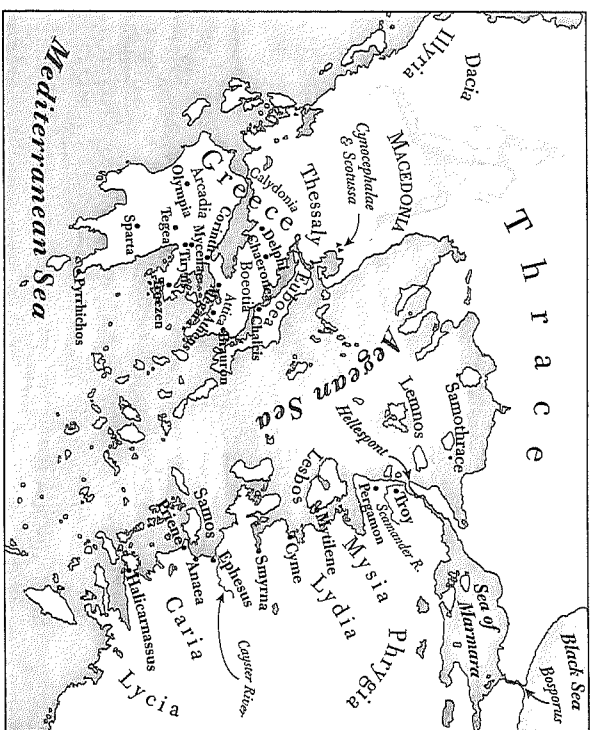
Theirs was not a typical Greek marriage, however. Atalanta and Hippomenes spent their days as hunting companions and impetuous lovers. One day while out chasing game, they impulsively had sex in a sacred precinct. In the midst of their passionate lovemaking, they were transformed into a pair of lions. From that moment and for all time, Atalanta and Hippomenes would live as lioness and lion.

Atalanta's fabled racetrack became a well-known landmark in Arcadia; it was still proudly pointed out to tourists in the time of the Roman Empire. At Tegea, Atalanta's birthplace, the gigantic tusks of the Calydonian Boar were displayed in the temple (until the emperor Augustus took them to Rome). The Greek traveler Pausanias visited the temple in about AD 180 and marveled at its monumental frieze depicting the Calydonian Boar Hunt (by the great sculptor Skopas, 350 BC). In the 1880s, French archaeologists discovered those temple ruins. They unearthed fragments of the grand pediment sculptures admired by Pausanias: hunting hounds, heroes, the head of the Calydonian Boar, and Atalanta. The altar was strewn with boars' tusks dedicated by generations of hunters in memory of Atalanta. The archaeologists also found marble reliefs of a lion and a lioness representing the transformation of Atalanta and Hippomenes.³



Greek myths were illustrated in thousands of paintings on vases, sculptures, and other artworks in antiquity, and Atalanta's story was no exception. The great boar hunt was extremely popular, appearing in frescoes, statues, and vase paintings from the sixth century BC through the Roman period. In Greek art, Atalanta was often depicted as a huntress with her bow, spear, and dog—and the boar's head. Several vases capture the moment when Meleager presents this trophy. Presenting the spoils of a hunt to one's beloved was an erotic gesture in ancient Greek poetry and art, so the incident tells us that Meleager and Atalanta were lovers.⁴

But the artistic evidence only deepens some mysteries in Atalanta's complicated, paradoxical story. In some boar-hunting scenes, for example,



MAP P.1. Ancient Greek world. Map © Michele Angel.

Atalanta wears a belted tunic with zigzag patterns, a soft pointed cap, and high cuffed boots. These are typical elements of the attire worn by foreign male and female archers from the lands the Greeks called "Scythia." This clothing began to appear in art after the Greeks' first contacts with peoples of the Black Sea and Eurasian steppes in the seventh century BC. Classical art experts struggle to explain why Atalanta, a Greek heroine, was shown wearing Scythian-style outfits like those worn by Amazons.⁵

More riddles arise in the earliest image of the Calydonian Boar Hunt, on the magnificent François Vase discovered in 1844. The spectacular two-foot-high wine krater signed by the painter Kleitias (ca. 570 BC) depicts more than two hundred people, many with identifying inscriptions. (Unfortunately, in 1902, the precious vase was smashed into 638 shards when a guard in the Florence museum hurled a stool at it; it was fully restored in 1973.) The giant boar is being attacked by Meleager, Peleus, Atalanta, and other Greek heroes. But three archers in the

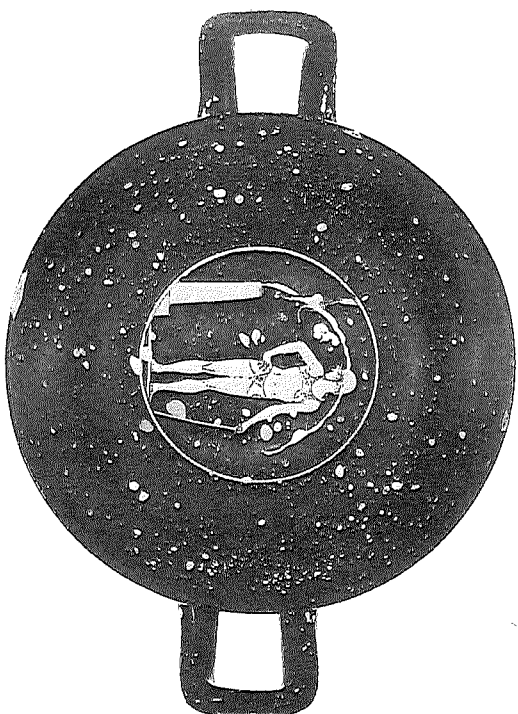


FIG. P.1. Atalanta in athletic outfit (her name is inscribed above). Red-figure kylix (drinking cup), Euxine Painter, fifth century BC, Inv. CA2259, Musée de Louvre, Paris. © Musée de Louvre, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais/Les frères Chazetville/Art Resource, NY.

scene present an enigma. One draws a Scythian bow; their quivers are at their waists in Scythian style; and they wear the distinctive pointed caps of Scythians. One bears the name "Kimertos," which associates him with the Cimmerians, a tribe of Scythia; another archer's name, "Toxamis," combines Greek "arrow" with the Iranian suffix *-mis*. Why would Atalanta be accompanied by bowmen dressed like Scythians in this quintessential Greek myth?⁶

Atalanta was the only wrestling heroine in Greek myth and art, and her grappling contest with Peleus was also very popular in artworks. In these athletic scenes, Atalanta is shown in a belted loincloth (*perizonia*, typically worn by barbarian male athletes). She goes topless or wears a kind of sports bra (*strophion*, often worn by female acrobats) and an exercise cap. Sexy details in the wrestling images hint that there might have been more to her match with Peleus than just sport. In one vase painting, a small lion figure is embroiled on the seat of Atalanta's wrestling trunks, an allusion to her character and to her mythic fate.⁷

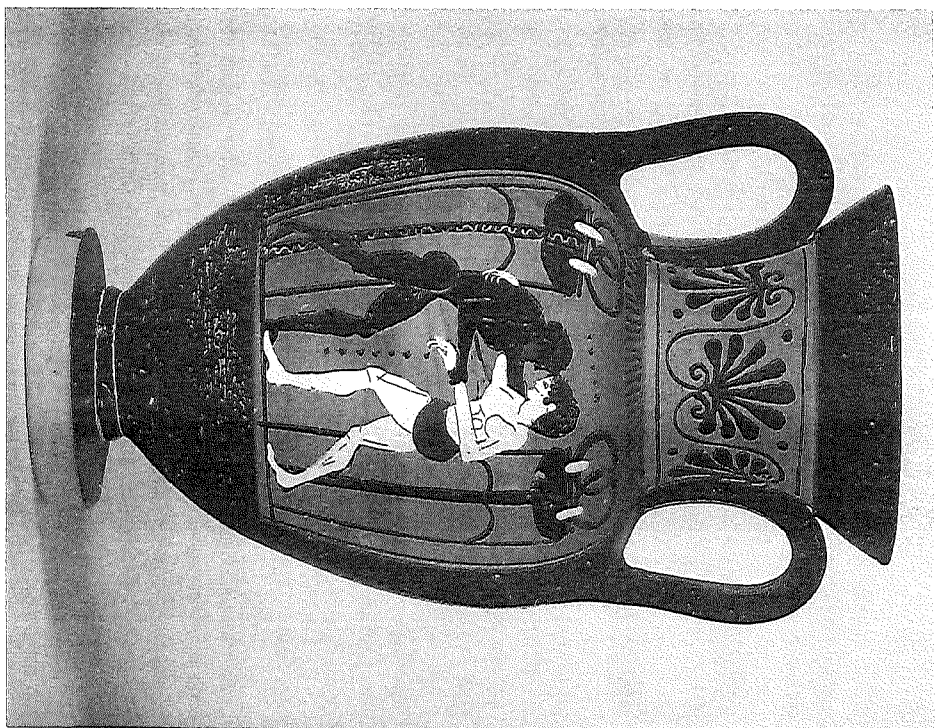


FIG. 12. Atalanta wrestling Pelus. Attic black-figure amphora from Nola, Diosphos Painter, sixth-fifth centuries BC, INV. F1837, bpk, Berlin/Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen/ photo by Johannes Laurentius/Art Resource, NY.

Atalanta's transformation into a lioness also mystifies. Later Latin and medieval commentators tried to explain the conversion as a divine punishment—by making the perverse claim that lions could never mate with their own species.⁸ This peculiar notion is accepted by modern scholars who portray Atalanta as “sentenced to hunt forever” as a

solitary lioness, “never permitted to have sex again.” But both she *and* her lover were changed into lions. And there is no evidence for the odd belief about the love life of lions in classical Greek literature. The Roman naturalist Pliny (first century AD) is commonly cited for this erroneous idea about lions, but in fact what Pliny says is that lions are extremely passionate, jealous mates with each other and they sometimes interbred with other large cats. The lovers’ transformation into a lion and a lioness at a moment of sexual bliss seems uniquely gratifying, less a punishment and more like a sympathetic divine intervention for a couple who refused to conform to traditional Greek marriage roles.⁹ In the form of lions, the most noble of wild animals—creatures known to stalk and kill prey together—the hunting companions/lovers Atalanta and Hippomenes could continue to hunt and mate in mythic eternity.

That Atalanta was changed into a lioness does drive home a powerful message, though. There was no place in ordinary Greek society for a woman like Atalanta who loved to chase game, fight men, and wander at will. She would be an outsider, bereft of community, for rejecting the life of Greek wives who were confined to a domestic sphere of children and kinfolk. The myth expresses the powerful mixed emotions that Atalanta’s independence and physical vigor aroused among Greek males. Some men, like Meleager’s uncles, reacted with anger and violence. But other men, like Meleager and Hippomenes, thought Atalanta deserved to live as she wished, and a great many men found her sexually desirable and might risk their lives to be her lifelong partner. As the ancient writer Aelian declared, no timid man would ever be attracted to Atalanta—and only the most courageous could even meet her challenging gaze.¹⁰

But Greek men who yearned for a self-reliant mate like Atalanta would not find her in Greece. Such women dwelled among barbarians around the Black Sea. Several myths told of Greek heroes who were paired with formidable women of those regions. One was the Argonauts’ leader, Jason, who fell for the fiercely independent Medea on the far shore of the Black Sea and brought her back to Greece (where she was labeled “a lioness”). Odysseus became the enchantress Circe’s prisoner of love; her name appears to be Circassian, a language of the Caucasus.¹¹ The Greek hero Theseus kidnapped a warrior princess—the

Amazon Antiope—from the southern Black Sea coast and brought her back to Athens (chapter 16).

Perhaps some Greek girls longed to be like Atalanta, the intrepid huntress who went her own way. But their hopes were dashed at puberty when they were expected to marry and obey their husbands. Young Athenian girls participated in an initiation ritual called the *Arkteia* ("She-Bear"), in which they pretended to be wild bear cubs in sanctuaries of Artemis. In her myth, Atalanta had been a "cub" raised by a she-bear. The cult is mysterious, but we know the girls' activities included footraces, which also evokes Atalanta. Archaeological artifacts from the *Arkteia* sanctuary at Brauron include images of bears and young girls running, and numerous toys and dolls that were dedicated to Artemis at the conclusion of the girls' ritual entry into womanhood.¹²

Scholars believe that the She-Bear rites stressed the suppression of the young girls' untamed Atalantean nature as a preparation for marriage. Greek male writers often characterized pubescent girls as wild animals who desired to lead the unrestrained life of an Atalanta. Instead of lionesses, Greek maidens were supposed to be transformed into docile matrons. As one classicist expresses this concept, "the Amazon in them had to die."¹³

Another intriguing question concerns the ownership of the erotically charged artworks featuring the huntress heroine who defied Greek sexual norms. It turns out that many of the vases decorated with images of Atalanta, like the François Vase, were special shapes specifically designed as wedding gifts. Atalanta also appears on women's perfume flasks. Why would illustrations of *Atalanta* be considered appropriate gifts for newlyweds and women? Atalanta—an icon of "social and sexual perversity" who escaped the yoke of marriage—seems to be a particularly "troubling" image to give to a bride, remarks one classical scholar. Were pictures of Atalanta really negative examples to warn the bride and groom of the dangers of both excessive lust and chastity, as some argue? Did such gifts really symbolize the "taming of the wild by the civilized Greek male?"¹⁴

As everyone knew, Atalanta was never tamed. The popularity of her image in public and private art—and especially on wedding vases and women's personal objects—raises some tantalizing questions about

Greek private life.¹⁵ Perhaps the stories and illustrations of Atalanta encouraged a Greek woman, inside her own home and in the secluded bedchamber with her husband, to imagine herself as an Atalanta or even a lioness.

Atalanta was also pictured on Greek vases used at male-only symposiums. So both men and women chose to surround themselves with vibrant images of this strong, independent woman; contemplating these images provided pleasure and food for thought for both sexes. The popularity of the myth of Atalanta shows that Greek men and women could delight in the tale of a vigorous young woman free of social constraints and traditional marriage. Despite the dissonance and ambivalence ignited by the idea of women as men's equals, Greeks enjoyed the stories of heroes and heroines as partners in a dangerous hunt and other adventures filled with peril and glory.

Puzzles about Atalanta multiply the closer one looks. There is even something curious about Atalanta's name. The sounds of the ancient Greek for "balance, equal," *Atalanta*, closely resemble a phrase in an ancient Caucasian language spoken in Abkhazia (northeastern coast of the Black Sea), meaning "He gave or set something down before her." Could this phrase allude to the presentation of the trophy boar and/or throwing down the golden apples? The Greeks were notoriously fond of making up Greek etymologies for borrowed foreign words (chapters 1 and 5). The two names, Abkhazian and Greek, are semantically complementary; each fits features of Atalanta's myth. Some scholars speculate that the Calydonian Boar Hunt could contain traces of Scythian folklore, a fascinating possibility.

Remarkably, another Abkhazian-sounding phrase appears in the non-Greek inscription on the vase painting of Atalanta wrestling Peleus, describing her as "curly-haired" (fig. P2). A recently translated ancient Abkhazian saga tells of a strong young woman, Gunda the Beautiful (also called Lady Hero), who vowed she would marry only the man who could defeat her in wrestling. Ninety-nine eager young suitors failed—she cut off their ears and branded the losers. Finally she grappled with a burly young man from a faraway land who managed to win the match, which lasted all day and shook the earth. They lived happily ever after.¹⁶ Atalanta's wedding challenge was shocking in a Greek context, but vigorous

young women setting athletic contests for potential suitors is a ubiquitous theme in Caucasian, Persian, and steppe nomad traditions (chapters 22 and 24).

No wonder Atalanta's story creates "befuddlement" among classicists pondering the meanings of her myth. In an attempt to capture her elusive significance, scholars argue that Atalanta embodied a chain of contradictions. She is said to represent both nonsexual virginity and wild, animal sex; she rejects motherhood *but* she bears a son who becomes a hero; she stands for nubile girls and young boys; she is *both* hunter and hunted; a threat to male order *but* a desired love object; a man-killer *but* a man-lover. Atalanta is "a study in ambiguity," a "mélange of discordant behaviors." Most scholars conclude that Atalanta's myth must have been part of a ritual initiation for Greek boys, while serving as a negative role model for girls. The great French classicist Jean-Pierre Vernant admitted, "Everything with Atalanta gets so confused."¹⁷

Atalanta is unique in Greek myth, and her story is extraordinary and complex, a magnetic focus for the push-pull of anxiety and desire disturbing the Greeks who repressed their own daughters and wives. She is a most untypical Greek female. Her life is idyllic; she rambles around the countryside engaged in hunting and sports, pastimes ordinarily enjoyed by men. Atalanta is bold, armed and dangerous; she defends herself with bow and spear; she challenges and kills men and wins heroic honors in a male-dominated expedition. She rejects traditional marriage and enjoys sex with lovers of her own choosing.¹⁸

Atalanta was an outlier, a lone, isolated figure. A Greek girl like Atalanta remained a mythic dream. But the Greeks had heard about a place where Atalanta would have fit in perfectly, a land where someone like Atalanta could find sisterhood, social acceptance, and male companionship. That place was among the Amazons.



Who were the Amazons?

In Greek myth, Amazons were fierce warrior women of exotic Eastern lands, as courageous and skilled in battle as the mightiest Greek heroes. Amazons were major characters not only in the legendary Trojan War but also in the chronicles of the greatest Greek city-state, Athens.

Every great champion of myth—Heracles, Theseus, Achilles—proved his valor by overcoming powerful warrior queens and their armies of women. Those glorious struggles against foreign man-killers were recounted in oral tales and written epics and illustrated in countless artworks throughout the Greco-Roman world. Famous historical figures, among them King Cyrus of Persia, Alexander the Great, and the Roman general Pompey, also tangled with Amazons. Greek and Latin authors never doubted that Amazons had existed in the remote past, and many reported that women living the life of Amazons still dwelled in lands around the Black Sea and beyond.¹⁹ Modern scholars, on the other hand, usually consign Amazons to the realm of the Greek imagination.

But were Amazons real? Though they were long believed to be purely imaginary, overwhelming evidence now shows that the Amazon traditions of the Greeks and other ancient societies derived in large part from historical facts.²⁰ Among the nomad horse-riding peoples of the steppes known to the Greeks as "Scythians," women lived the same rugged outdoor life as the men. These "warlike tribes have no cities, no fixed abodes," wrote one ancient historian; "they live free and unconquered, so savage that even the women take part in war."²¹ Archaeology reveals that about one out of three or four nomad women of the steppes was an active warrior buried with her weapons. Their lifestyle—so different from the domestic seclusion of Greek women—captured the imagination of the Greeks. The only real-life parallels in Greece were rare instances of wives forced to defend their families and towns against invaders in the absence of their husbands.

The myth of Atalanta seems to suggest that a girl raised in a natural state would grow up to be something like an Amazon. In reality, "going Amazon" was an option for girls who had been raised since childhood to ride horses and shoot arrows on the steppes. The "equalizing" combination of horseback riding and archery meant that women could be as fast and as deadly as men. Whether by choice or compelled by circumstances, ordinary women of Scythia could be hunters and warriors without giving up femininity, male companionship, sex, and motherhood.

The universal quest to find balance and harmony between men and women, beings who are at once so alike and so different, lies at the heart of all Amazon tales. That timeless tension helps to explain why there were as many love stories about warrior women as there were war stories.



In a nutshell: Amazons, the women warriors who fought Heracles and other heroes in Greek myth, were long assumed to be an imaginative Greek invention. But Amazon-like women were real—although of course the myths were made up. Archaeological discoveries of battle-scarred female skeletons buried with weapons prove that warlike women really did exist among nomads of the Scythian steppes of Eurasia. So Amazons were Scythian women—and the Greeks understood this long before modern archaeology. And the Greeks were not the only ones to spin tales about Amazons. Thrilling adventures of warrior heroines of the steppes were told in many ancient cultures besides Greece.

Our mission is to sort myth from fact. As the first full compendium of the lives and legends of Amazons across the ancient world, this study explores the realities behind the stories, digging deep and ranging far afield to unearth hidden knowledge and surprising recent discoveries about the women warriors mythologized as Amazons. How do we know for certain that Amazon-like women actually existed in antiquity? Did Amazons really cut off one breast? Were Amazons tattooed? What about their sex life? Why would Amazons prefer trousers instead of skirts? Which intoxicants did they favor? How did they train their horses? What were the Amazons' most deadly weapons and what kind of injuries did they inflict? The answers to all these questions and more, drawing on ancient sources and the latest advances in archaeology, history, ethnology, linguistics, and scientific knowledge, are found in these pages.

Once we know what genuine warrior women's lives were like, the famous Amazons of classical myth and legend spring to life with remarkable new clarity. Why did Heracles kill Hippolyte, queen of the Amazons, instead of becoming her lover? What was the fate of Antiope, the only Amazon to marry a Greek hero? Why did the Amazons invade Athens—and who won that war? Could Achilles and the Amazon Penthesilea have been friends in an alternative world? How did a band of Amazons happen to sail to Rome? Who was the beautiful Amazon queen who stalked Alexander the Great across Asia?

The final section presents Amazons as they have never been seen before, from a non-Greek perspective. Instead of peering out with Greek eyes toward the barbarian East, we travel beyond the Mediterranean

world, around the Black and Caspian seas, and across the steppes, forests, mountains, and deserts to discover stories told by the ancient Scythians themselves and their neighbors, in Persia and Egypt, the Caucasus, Central Asia, India. At last we find ourselves in China looking west toward the "Great Wilderness" of the Xiongnu, a Chinese name for nomads whose women were as fierce as the men.

A comprehensive *Encyclopedia Amazonica* ranging from the Mediterranean to the Great Wall of China necessarily contains a great many unfamiliar proper names of people and places, testament to the far-flung, sweeping popularity of warrior women tales in antiquity. Anticipating that some readers might skip ahead and turn directly to chapters of greatest personal curiosity or interest, I have included plentiful cross-references to relevant discussions.

PART 1

WHO WERE THE AMAZONS?

I

ANCIENT PUZZLES AND MODERN MYTHS

In olden times, the earth thundered with the pounding of horses' hooves. In that long ago age, women would saddle their horses, grab their lances, and ride forth with their men folk to meet the enemy in battle on the steppes. The women of that time could cut out an enemy's heart with their swift, sharp swords. Yet they also comforted their men and harbored great love in their hearts. . . . After the frenzied battle, Queen Amezan leaned down from her saddle and realized in despair that the warrior she had killed was her beloved.

A choking cry filled her throat: My sun has set forever!

—*Caucasus tradition, Nart Saga* 26

Achilles removed the brilliant helmet from the lifeless Amazon queen. Penthesilea had fought like a raging leopard in their duel at Troy. Her valor and beauty were undimmed by dust and blood. Achilles' heart lurched with remorse and desire. . . . All the Greeks on the battlefield crowded around and marveled, wishing with all their hearts that their wives at home could be just like her.

—*Quintus of Smyrna, The Fall of Troy*

IF QUEEN AMEZAN AND QUEEN PENTHESILEA COULD somehow meet in real life, they would recognize each other as sister Amazons. Two tales, two storytellers, two sites far apart in time and place, and yet one common tradition of women who made love and war. The first tale arose *outside* the classical Greek world, in the northern Black Sea-Caucasus region among the descendants of the steppe nomads of Scythia. The other tale originated *within* the ancient Greek world, in epic poems about the legendary Trojan War. In the two traditions the male and female roles

are reversed, yet the stories resonate in striking ways—sharing similar characters, dramatic battle situations, emotions, tragic themes—and even the word “Amazon.”

Recently translated from the Circassian language, the first story tells of the mythic leader of a band of women warriors, Amerzan. It is one of many “Nart” sagas, oral traditions about heroes and heroines of the heart of ancient Scythian—and Amazon—territory (now southern Russia). The Caucasus tales preserve ancient Indo-European myths combined with the folk legends of Eurasian nomads, first encountered by Greeks who sailed the Black Sea in the seventh century BC. The sagas not only describe strong horsewomen who match the descriptions of Amazons in Greek myth, but they also suggest a possible Caucasian etymology for the ancient Greek loanword “amazon.”¹

The second vignette, about Achilles and Penthesilea, is an episode from the archaic Trojan War epic cycles, one of which was the *Iliad*. Many oral traditions about Amazons were already circulating before Homer’s day, the eighth/seventh century BC, around the time when the first recognizable images of Amazons appeared in Greek art. The *Iliad* covered only two months of the great ten-year war with Troy. At least six other epic poems preceded or continued the events in the *Iliad*, but they survive only as fragments. Many other lost oral traditions about the Trojan War are alluded to the *Iliad* and other works, and they are illustrated in ancient art depicting Greeks fighting Amazons. The lost poem *Arminispea* by the Greek traveler Aristas (ca. 670 BC) contained Amazon stories. Another wandering poet, Magnes from Smyrna (said to be Homer’s birthplace), recited tales in Lydian about an Amazon invasion of Lydia in western Anatolia in the early seventh century BC. Some scholars suggest that there was once a freestanding epic poem about Amazons, along the lines of the *Iliad*, a tantalizing possibility.²

One of the lost Trojan War epics, the *Aethiopis* (attributed to Arctinos of Miletos, eighth/seventh century BC), was a sequel to the *Iliad*, taking up the action where Homer left off. The *Aethiopis* described the arrival of Queen Penthesilea and her band of Amazon mercenaries who came to help the Trojans fight the Greeks. Scenes from this poem were very popular in Greek vase paintings. In the third century AD, the Greek poet Quintus of Smyrna drew on the *Aethiopis* to retell the story

of Penthesilea’s duel with the Greek champion Achilles, in his *Fall of Troy*, quoted in this chapter’s second epigraph.

Both of the tales quoted above—one from Scythia and the other from the Greek homeland—feature women whose fighting skills matched those of men. Their heroic exploits were imaginary, but their characters and actions arose from a common historical source: warrior cultures of the steppes where nomad horsemen and -women could experience parity at a level almost unimaginable for ancient Hellenes.

Myth and reality commingled in the Greek imagination, and as more and more details came to light about Scythian culture, the women of Scythia were explicitly identified as “Amazons.” Today’s archaeological and linguistic discoveries point to the core of reality that lay behind Greek Amazon myths. But in fact, the newfound archaeological evidence allows us to finally catch up with the ancient Greeks themselves. The Amazons of myth and the independent women of Scythia were *already* deeply intertwined in Greek thinking more than twenty-five hundred years *before* modern archaeologists and classicists began to realize that women warriors really did exist and influenced Greek traditions.

Amazons of classical literature and art arose from hazy facts elaborated by Greek mythographers and then came into sharper focus as knowledge increased. Rumors of warlike nomad societies—where a *woman* might win fame and glory through “manly” prowess with weapons—fascinated the Greeks. The idea of bold, resourceful women warriors, the equals of men, dwelling at the edges of the known world, inspired an outpouring of mythic stories, pitting the greatest Greek heroes against Amazon heroines from the East. Every Greek man, woman, boy, and girl knew these adventure stories by heart, stories illustrated in public and private artworks. The details of the “Amazon” lifestyle aroused speculation and debate. Many classical Greco-Roman historians, philosophers, geographers, and other writers described Amazonian-Scythian history and customs.

The early Greeks received their information about northeastern peoples from many different sources, including travelers, traders, and explorers, and from the indigenous, migrating tribes around the Black Sea, Caucasus Mountains, Caspian Sea, and Central Asia. The tribes’ accounts of themselves and culturally similar groups were transmitted

(and garbled) by layers of translations over thousands of miles. Another probable source was the high population of household slaves in Greece who hailed from Thrace and the Black Sea region.³ Selection bias was a factor. Accounts of "barbarian" customs that piqued Greek curiosity or matched Greek expectations might have been chosen over others. Yet a surprising number of accurate details, confirmed by archaeology, managed to sneak through all these obstacles.

The Scythians themselves left no written records. Much of our knowledge about them comes from the art and literature of Greece and Rome. But the Scythians did leave spectacular physical evidence of their way of life for archaeologists to uncover. Dramatic excavations of tombs, bodies, and artifacts illuminate the links between the women called Amazons and the warlike horsewomen archers of the Scythian steppes. According to one leading archaeologist, "All of the legends about Amazons find their visible archaeological reflection within the grave goods" of the ancient Scythians.⁴ That is an overstatement, yet recent and ongoing discoveries do offer astonishing evidence of the existence of authentic women warriors whose lives matched the descriptions of Amazons in Greek myths, art, and classical histories, geographies, ethnographies, and other writings. Scythian graves do contain battle-scarred skeletons of women buried with their weapons, horses, and other possessions. Scientific bone analysis proves that women rode, hunted, and engaged in combat in the very regions where Greco-Roman mythographers and historians once located "Amazons."

Archaeology shows that Amazons were not simply symbolic figments of the Greek imagination, as many scholars claim. Nor are Amazons unique to Greek culture, another common claim. In fact, Greeks were not the only people to spin tales about Amazon-like figures and warrior women ranging over the vast regions east of the Mediterranean. Other literate cultures, such as Persia, Egypt, India, and China, encountered warlike nomads in antiquity, and their narratives drew on their own knowledge of steppe nomads through alliances, exploration, trade, and warfare. Their heroes also fought and fell in love with Amazon-like heroines. Moreover, vestiges of the tales told in antiquity by Scythian peoples about themselves are preserved in traditional oral legends, epic poems, and stories of Central Asia, some only recently committed to writing.

Who were the Amazons? Their complex identity is enmeshed in history and imagination. To see them clearly, we first need to cast away murky symbolic interpretations and spurious popular beliefs.

POPULAR MISCONCEPTIONS

The single most notorious "fact" often used to describe Amazons is wrong. The idea that each Amazon removed one breast so that she could shoot arrows with ease is based on zero evidence. It was refuted in antiquity. Yet this bizarre belief, unique to the ancient Greeks, has persisted for more than twenty-five hundred years since it was first proposed in the fifth century BC by a Greek historian dabbling in etymology. The origins of the "single-breasted" Amazon and the controversies that still surround this false notion are so complex and fascinating that Amazon bosoms have their own chapter.

Some fallacies about Amazons can be traced to inconsistencies, gaps—and wild speculations—in the ancient Greek and Latin sources. Other modern misconceptions originate in attempts to explain Amazons solely in terms of their symbolic meaning for the Greeks, especially male Athenians.⁵ Conflicting claims in antiquity are still debated today, like the single-breast story. Were the Amazons a true gynocracy, a society of self-governing women living apart from men? Some pictured a tribe of man-hating virgins or domineering women who enslaved weak men and mutilated baby boys, a vision that led to speculations on how Amazon society reproduced.

AMAZONS, A TRIBE KNOWN FOR STRONG WOMEN

The notion that Amazons were hostile toward men was controversial even in antiquity. The confusion begins with their name. Linguistic evidence suggests that the earliest Greek form of the non-Greek name *Amazon* designated an ethnic group distinguished by a high level of equality between men and women. Rumors of such parity would have startled the Greeks, who lived according to strictly divided male and female roles. Long before the word "Scythian" or specific tribal names

appeared in Greek literature, "Amazons" may have been a name for a people notorious for strong, free women.⁶

The earliest reference to the Amazons in Greek literature appears in Homer's *Iliad* in the formulaic phrase *Amazones antianeirai*. Modern scholars are unanimous that the plural noun *Amazones* was not originally a Greek word. But it is unclear which language it was borrowed from and what its original meaning was. What is known for certain is that *Amazon* does not have anything to do with breasts (chapter 5 for probable origins of the name).

There is something remarkable about Homer's earliest use of *Amazones* in the *Iliad*. The form of the name falls into the linguistic category of ethnic designations in epic poetry (another Homeric example is *Myrmidones*, the warriors led by Achilles at Troy). This important clue tells us that *Amazones* was originally a Hellenized name for "a plurality, a people," as in *Hellenes* for Greeks and *Troes* for the Trojans. The Greeks used distinctive feminine endings (typically *-ai*) for associations made up exclusively of women, such as *Nymphai* (Nymphs) or *Thooiai* for Trojan women. But *Amazones* does not have the feminine ending that one would expect if the group consisted only of women. Therefore, the name *Amazones* would originally have been "understood as . . . a people consisting of men and women." As classicist Josine Blok points out in her discussion of this puzzle, without the addition of the feminine epithet *antianeirai* "there is no way of telling that this was a people of female warriors."⁷ The inescapable conclusion is that *Amazones* was not a name for a women-only entity, as many have assumed. Instead *Amazones* once indicated an entire ethnic group.

So the earliest literary references to Amazons identified them as a nation or people, followed by *antianeirai*, a descriptive tag along the lines of "the Saka, Pointed Hat Wearers," or "the Budini, Eaters of Lice." Indeed, many ancient Greek writers do treat Amazons as a tribe of men and women. They credit the tribe with innovations such as ironworking and domestication of horses. Some early vase paintings show men fighting alongside Amazons.⁸

But what about the meaning of the epithet attached to *Amazones*? That word is slippery and complex. *Antianeirai* is often translated in modern times as "opposites of men," "against men," "opposing men,"

"antagonistic to men," or "man-hating." In fact, however, in ancient Greek epic diction the prefix *anti-* did not ordinarily suggest opposition or antagonism as the English prefix "anti-" does today. Instead *anti-* meant "equivalent" or "matching." Accordingly, *antianeirai* is best translated as "equals of men."

Such ethnonyms, names of tribes, are typically masculine, with the understanding that the female members are included in the collective name (as in "man" for all humans or "les Indiens d'Amérique" for an entire ethnic group). But the curious formation *anteneirai* is a unique feminine plural compound that included the Greek masculine noun "man," *aner*. A parallel formation occurs in the Amazon name *Deianeira*, "Man-Destroyer," in which *aner* is the object of the verb stem *dei-* (destroy) with the suffix *-ia*. If there had been a group of women named thus, the plural would be the *Deianeirai*?

Amazones antianeirai is "unmistakably an ethnic designation," yet the epithet is feminine, a reversal of expectations that puzzles scholars.¹⁰ The odd semantic effect of "men," in the sense of a whole people or nation, combined with a feminine description brings to mind the popular tendency among English speakers to refer to cats as "she" and dogs as "he," even though it is understood that tomcats and bitches are also members of the respective species.

The adaptation of the original, unknown barbarian name to the Greek epic formula for a whole people produced "a proper noun riddled with ambiguity." Some scholars interpret this peculiarity as evidence that Homer's *Amazones antianeirai* must have been a purely mythic construction created by the Greeks for a fictional "race" of women warriors. The assumption is that the idea of women behaving like men was so difficult to grasp, so "confusing and menacing" and disruptive for Greeks, that the name was "only conceivable in the imaginary world of myth." But should we underestimate the ancient Greeks' ability to conceive of and name a real people whose gender relations were different from their own? In fact, it was common for the Greeks to describe and name *foreigners by reference to their exotic, disturbing customs*, such as lice eating, head-hunting, polyandry (multiple husbands), and cannibalism.¹¹

The linguistic evidence points to a reasonable explanation for the unusual semantics of the name "Amazons, equals of men." The fact that

the earliest nomenclature for Amazons took the form of a name for an ethnic group is highly significant. Real ethnic groups, of course, are made up of men, women, and children, and in early antiquity the word *Amazones* would have been "understood as a group of people consisting of men and women," as Blok points out. Homer and other archaic writers could have used the phrase *Amazones andres*, "the Amazon people," but their choice of *Amazones antianeirai* clearly highlighted this group's most outstanding quality. Because *aner/andres* could also mean "man" in the sense of a whole people, a tribe, or a nation, the phrase also carries the connotation of "equal humans." The Greeks first identified the Amazons ethnographically, as a nation of men and women distinguished by something outstanding in their gender relations. Later, any ambivalence or anxiety that knowledge of this alternative gender-neutral culture evoked among Greeks was played out in their mythic narratives about martial women.

Here is a plausible sequence: Archaic Greeks had heard about peoples ranging over the Black Sea-steppes region, a warrior society that exhibited a remarkable degree of sexual equality. Their non-Greek name, sounding something like "amazon," was adapted to the epic form of ethnonyms, thus *Amazones*. The descriptive epithet *antianeirai* was added to call out the most notable feature of this group: gender equality. The epithet was feminine to emphasize the extraordinary status of women among this particular people, relative to the status of women in Greek culture. Unlike most other ethnic groups familiar to the Greeks, in which the men were the most significant members, among *Amazones* it was the women who stood out. *Amazones antianeirai* could originally have meant something like "Amazons, the tribe whose women are equals," or simply "Amazons, the equals." A race of warlike men and women piqued the curiosity of the Greeks and led to stories about heroic women of faraway lands who were worthy opponents of male warriors.

Gradually, as more travel and information allowed the Greeks to differentiate among the numerous individual ethnolinguistic tribes of Scythia, the old concept of "Amazons" as a collective name to designate an exotic "race" of equal sexes evolved to refer to a related but novel idea: a long-ago tribe of warlike women who fought men, dominated men, or lived entirely without men. The meaning of *anti-* in the epithet

began to shift from "equals of" to "opponents of" to suggest hostility to males, and the atypical feminine form of what was once a proper name for an entire people now encouraged visions of a mythic gynocracy.¹²

The earliest name for Amazons preserved in literature is strong evidence that it first entered Greek culture as a term for hazily understood "Scythian" peoples; then over time Amazons became a mythic construct, while still retaining and accumulating kernels of truth. The linguistic evidence gives us a practical approach to understanding Amazons as members of real nomad tribes. This perspective, in turn, helps us make sense of many other striking and ambiguous features of the mythic and later historical accounts of Amazons.

MAN-HATING VIRGINS?

The Greek playwright Aeschylus (fifth century BC) called Amazons "maiden fearless in battle." *Maiden*, often conflated with *virgin*, meant "unmarried." The notion that Amazons were lifelong virgins who resisted sex with men might have arisen from comparisons with the virgin Greek goddesses of war and hunting, Athena and Artemis. "Man-killers" (*androktones*) was another ancient label for Amazons too. Herodotus (ca. 450 BC) remarked that some Amazons of Scythia did not marry unless they had slain (or fought) a man in battle, and he commented that a few never married. Pomponius Mela (ca. AD 43) wrote that "to kill the enemy is a woman's military duty [and] virginity was the punishment for those who fail." But that did not mean that the women remained technical virgins, since Herodotus and other ancient authors describe plenty of Amazon sex with men outside of traditional marriage as understood by the Greeks. Some, like Diodorus and Hippocrates, reported that it was the custom for younger women to practice martial arts and serve as active soldiers, while older women with children would ride to war only in emergencies.¹³

A strong bond of sisterhood was another famous Amazon trait, sometimes interpreted today as a sexual preference for women. The image of Amazons as man-hating lesbians is a twentieth-century twist, however. No ancient account mentions this possibility—and the Greeks

and Romans were certainly never shy about discussing male or female homosexuality. Hellenikos, a contemporary of Herodotus, described Amazons as "man-loving." Numerous other Greek and Roman writers agreed that Amazons were eager sexual partners with chosen male lovers and that they sometimes formed long-term relationships with men (chapter 8). The Amazons' sexual activity with men is underscored by the fact that only three Amazons—Alkippe, Sinope, and Orithya—were singled out as remarkable because of their vows of virginity.¹⁴

Verdict: man-killers on the battlefield but not man-haters. Amazons were modeled on stories of self-confident women of the steppe cultures, who fought for glory and survival and enjoyed male companionship, but on terms that seemed extraordinary to the ancient Greeks.

SYMBOLIC FIGURES?

Archaeological evidence shows that Eurasian women fitting the description of mythic Amazons were contemporaries of the ancient Greeks. Warlike women of the steppes also appear in the traditions of non-Hellenic cultures. Yet the idea that Amazons were fantasy figures conjured up by Greek men to reflect anxiety-fraught aspects of their own Hellenic culture still holds sway. Amazons in Greek art are interpreted as illustrations of myth, not reality. This view is expressed in a recent off-the-cuff comment by a leading art historian: "It is useless to say anything about what the Amazons really were, because they were not *really* anything."¹⁵

So many diverse meanings are projected onto Amazons that it is impossible to do them all justice here. Amazons have been interpreted as negative role models for Greek women; as repulsive monsters or "Others" who threatened the Greek masculine ego; as figures justifying gender inequality or expressing fears of female rebellion against male oppression; as enemies of civilization; as symbols of wild, animal-like sexuality; as women who refuse to grow up and accept marriage and childbirth; as asexual "un-women"; as political stand-ins for inferior barbarians, "effeminate" Persians, or foreign wives of Athenian citizens; as representations of pubescent Greek girls or teenage Greek boys; and as an inside-out, upside-down mirror of Hellenic culture.¹⁶

Some interpretations are incompatible with ancient and modern evidence. For example, Amazons have been paired with Centaurs as unruly forces of uncivilized Nature. But unlike the drunken, priapic halfhorse-halfmen of myth whose crude weapons were boulders and uprooted trees, Amazons were said to tame horses, form orderly warrior societies, use iron weapons, wear tailored clothing, control their own sexuality, manifest historical progress, carry out strategic warfare, and found important cities. Amazons as loathsome "Others" is hard to reconcile with the positive ways they were actually portrayed in antiquity. Greeks imagined many truly repugnant female monsters—Medusa, Echidna, Scylla, Harpies—but Amazons were consistently depicted as admirable, athletic, beautiful, sexually desirable, valiant women who embodied the same traits that distinguished heroic Greek males. Seeking unconscious metaphors in mythological stories can spark insights about ancient Greek psychology. But explaining Amazons as wholly make-believe figures created by Greeks for Greeks has resulted in a logjam of competing theories. Thanks to archaeology, the tide is beginning to turn and Amazons are at last achieving "historical respectability."¹⁷

Yet many still believe that the Greek psyche summoned mythic Amazons into existence so they could be killed off. Amazons "exist [only] in order . . . to be defeated"; they have no history, "no future," and the heroic warrior status to which they aspire is "impossible."¹⁸ It's true that Amazons do end up killed by Greek heroes in the major myths. But is it any wonder that Greek national myths would show their own heroes triumphing over powerful foreign enemies? Greek heroes crush foes, male and female alike, from Medusa to the Trojans. More significant is that the myths invariably feature equally matched Greek and Amazon antagonists. Akin to the noble heroes of Troy bested by Greek champions in the *Iliad*, each Amazon fighter is just as brave as the hero she confronts. In Greek vase paintings, the outcome is often suspenseful: Amazons are shown fighting and dying courageously, and some are even shown killing Greek warriors. Amazons in Greek art are always depicted running *toward* danger, never fleeing (as Persians sometimes were). Out of more than 550 vase paintings of fighting Amazons, fewer than 10 show Amazons gesturing for mercy. Combat with an Amazon foe requires a fair match; otherwise there can be no honor for the ultimate Greek victor.¹⁹

AMAZON AS HEROES

In the Greek myths Amazons always die young and beautiful. But a short, splendid life and violent death in battle was the perfect *heroic* ideal in myth. Indeed, this destiny (*kleos apbition*, “imperishable glory”) was what every great Greek hero craved for himself—the “beautiful death” was supposed to guarantee eternal fame and glory. The heroic spirit—“If our lives be short, let our fame be great”—was also the choice of the heroes and heroines in the Nart sagas of the Caucasus. The many wounded and dead Amazons depicted in classical Greek art are invariably beautiful and brave (the only difference is that they are not shown “herotically nude” like male heroes; see chapter 7).²⁰ One cannot help but notice that in the Greek myths *and* in semihistorical accounts, nearly every Amazon we know by name displays exemplary heroic attributes and achieves honor by dying heroically in battle.

In fact, what is truly surprising about Amazons is the realization that these non-Greek women actually *surpass* the Greek mythic heroes in the manner of their deaths. Despite their vaunted courage and might, not one great Greek hero manages to achieve a glorious death on the battlefield.²¹ Perseus, the slayer of Medusa, dies of old age. Bellerophon, thrown by his flying horse, Pegasus, into a thornbush, ends up a blind, lame hermit. Theseus, Athens’s founding hero? Shoved off a cliff by an elderly king. Odysseus? Accidentally done in by his son, stabbed with a stingray spine. The superhero Hercules perishes ignominiously, wrapped in a poisoned tunic, a gift from his wife. The mighty Achilles is felled by an arrow in the heel, shot from behind. Jason, leader of the Argonauts—crushed in his sleep by a rotten beam from his old ship, the *Argo*.

The quintessentially heroic credentials of Amazons make it difficult to see them as objects of contempt or victims in a tragedy of ancient misogyny. Instead, Amazons of myth represented worthy human adversaries for Greek heroes. The heroic status of Amazons is evident in a striking painting of the Trojan War on an Etruscan vase (ca. 330 BC). The Etruscans, a mysterious Italian civilization that flourished from about 700 BC until they were absorbed by the Romans in what is now Tuscany, were very familiar with Greek myths, but they also had their own tales. Etruscan women enjoyed relatively liberated lives compared to Greek women. On one side of the vase Achilles is killing a Trojan.

The other side shows an Amazon mourning as the ghosts of two bandaged and cloaked Amazons enter the Underworld as heroes. They are labeled “Penthesilaia” (Penthesilea) and “hinthi (A.)turnucas.” *Hinhi* is Etruscan for “soul or shade”; (A.)*turnuca* is the Etruscan version of either Andromache (“Manly Fighter”) or Dorymache (“Spear Fighter”). The Amazons’ bandages are artistic shorthand for their having died valiantly and honorably in battle. Andromache is a known Amazon name, but this would be the only instance of an Amazon named Attur-nuca/Dorymache (although there is an Amazon named Enchesimar-gos, “Spear Mad”).²² Was there once a popular Greek or Etruscan story, now lost, that associated this heroine with Penthesilea’s band of Amazons at Troy?

A stunning discovery in 2013 suggests that warrior women existed among the Etruscans. Inside a rock-cut tomb in ancient Tarquinia (ca. 620 BC), archaeologists found a skeleton holding a spear; the burned remains of another person lay nearby; jewelry, a bronze sewing box, and a painted Corinthian perfume/oil flask accompanied the pair. The spear led the archaeologists to identify the skeleton as a warrior prince buried with his cremated wife. But DNA bone analysis soon revealed that the lance belonged to a woman aged 35–40 and the ashes belonged to a man of 20–30. (Preconceptions about “masculine” and “feminine” grave goods have led archaeologists to make a host of similar errors; scientific osteological testing is overturning these biases; see chapter 4).²³

Amazons in classical literature were *human*, with desires, flaws, virtues, ambitions, and vulnerabilities similar to those attributed to mortal Greek heroes. Moreover—like the greatest Greek heroes—each famous Amazon queen was the protagonist of her own mythic biography, which generated multiple alternative versions. Like the tales of Theseus, Hercules, Achilles, and Atalanta, the many different stories of individual Amazons were filled with great challenges, adventures, victories, and loss.

A PURELY GREEK INVENTION?

Western scholars often take it for granted that Amazons were the exclusive creative property of the ancient Greeks. “It is important to stress that these foreign heroes existed only in Greek myth and not in native

mythic traditions," is how one classicist expresses the claim. Another states that "Amazons are not represented in cultures based on non-Greek emblems and norms." But this unexamined assumption turns out to be false.²⁴ The belief that Amazons existed only in Greek culture has led classicists to maintain that all Amazon figures in Greek art and literature were doomed cardboard figures created to fill conceptual, symbolic niches for the Greeks. Such a Hellenocentric claim is disproved by literary, historical, artistic, linguistic, and archaeological evidence for warlike women of ancient Scythia in a wide range of other ancient cultures. Even the tendency to view Amazon figures as purely symbolic is not confined to classical Greek scholarship. The classicists' interpretation of Amazons as symbols unknowingly recapitulates the interpretations of some modern religious Islamicist scholars, who make similar claims about Amazon-like women in ancient Persian literature (chapter 23).²⁵

So the Greeks did *not* invent the idea of Amazons. But a stark difference *does* distinguish the main Greek *mythic script* from other Amazon traditions in antiquity. In the Greek myths, Greek heroes always destroy Amazons. Psychosocial explanations focus on the drastic scenes of violence toward strong foreign women in Greek myth and art.²⁶ Greek myths are unique in their insistence on death to Amazons, but this focus misses a bigger story. The mythic formula is radically at odds with the more realistic, evenhanded descriptions of Amazon warrior women by Greco-Roman historians, geographers, and ethnographers, and their accounts share much in common with the tales of non-Greek cultures that met Scythian horse archers on the battlefield. In these more realistic scenarios, warlike women can forge alliances with former enemies, have male companions, fall in love, have children, and sometimes win and sometimes lose in love and war.

Surprisingly, even in the dark archaic Greek myths one can detect glimmers of other options. Traces of alternative story lines in vase paintings and fragments of Greek literature hint that peaceful interactions, even romance, might have been possible outcomes. In the Greek myths about Amazons that have come down to us, war always triumphs over love. But *outside* Greek mythology and *beyond the Greek world*, women warriors and male warriors might make love and war together as equals—and even live happily ever after.

THREE CATEGORIES OF AMAZONS

In untangling the myths and realities of warrior women of antiquity, at least three categories of "Amazons" emerge (and sometimes converge). In the contexts of history, Greek mythology, and non-Greek settings, the women we call Amazons fall into the following groups.

1. *Real nomadic horsewomen archers of the steppes*. The historical reality of Amazon-like women contemporary with the ancient Greeks is now fully documented by archaeological evidence. The lives of these once-living counterparts of mythic and legendary Amazons are accessible to us through excavations of burials, scientific analysis of bodily remains and grave goods, comparative ethnological studies, linguistics, and historical sources both ancient and modern.

2. *Amazon queens Hippolyte, Antiope, and Penthesilea and other Amazons of classical mythology*. The adventures and biographies of warrior women who battled Greeks took shape in the storytelling imagination interwoven with strands of reality from the domain of steppe nomads. In the major myths about Greeks versus Amazons, despite their bravery, erotic appeal, and prowess the women are almost always killed or captured.

3. *Women warriors in non-Greek traditions from the Black Sea to China*. Amazon-like heroines appear in Egyptian romances, Persian legends, epic traditions of the Caucasus and Central Asia, and Chinese chronicles. These non-Greek stories diverge from the grim Greek mythic script that doomed Amazons to defeat and death. Among the cultures the Greeks designated as "barbarian," myths, legends, and historical accounts express great pride in their own heroic warrior women who won victories over men and survived to fight again. When non-Greek societies faced female fighters among their enemies, many tales recount how they eagerly sought to have these Amazons as lovers, companions, and allies instead of killing them.



After Heracles, Amazons were the single most popular subjects in Greek vase paintings. Amazons appeared in city murals and monumental civic sculptures in Athens and other Greek cities; tombs and places

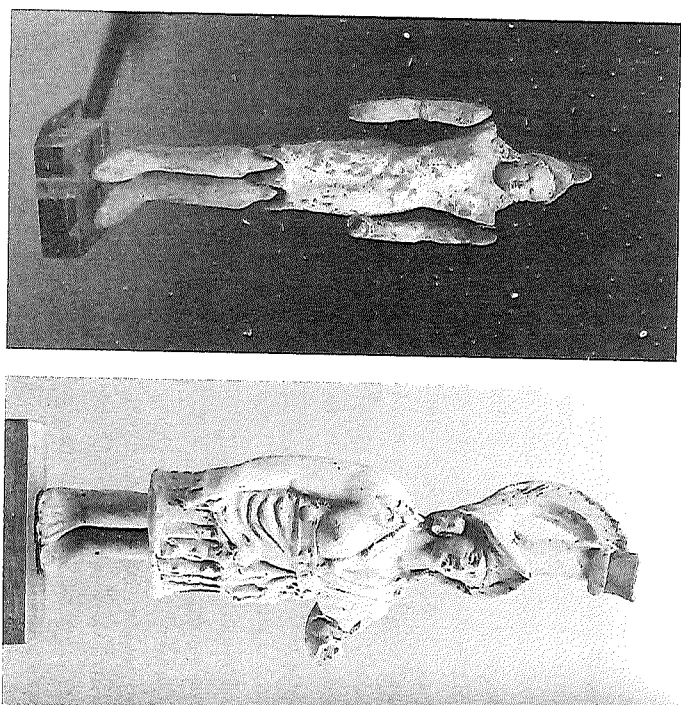


FIG. 1.1. Left, Amazon doll with helmet, articulated arms and legs, terra-cotta, fifth century BC, Greek, Aegina, Inv. CA955, Musée de Louvre, Paris. Photo: Gerard Blot. © RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource, NY. Right, Amazon doll with articulated legs, dressed as a hoplite, terra-cotta, signed MAECIUS, Asia Minor, Inv. CA1493, Musée de Louvre, Paris. © Musée de Louvre, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais/Les frères Chazetville/Art Resource, NY.

linked to Amazons were revered in the Greek and Anatolian landscape. Some of the most poignant and little-known ancient artifacts are dolls representing Amazons, discovered in the graves of young girls in Greece and Asia Minor. Had the little girls lived to be married, they would have dedicated these dolls to the goddess Artemis. Clay dolls in the Louvre and other collections are identified as Amazons by their pointed Scythian-style caps with lappets (earflaps), like the caps of many Amazons in Greek art, and by their armor and weapons. The doll on the left in figure 1.1 was made Athens in 450–400 BC. She is six inches tall, and her molded hair and helmet were once brightly painted. (Early artistic

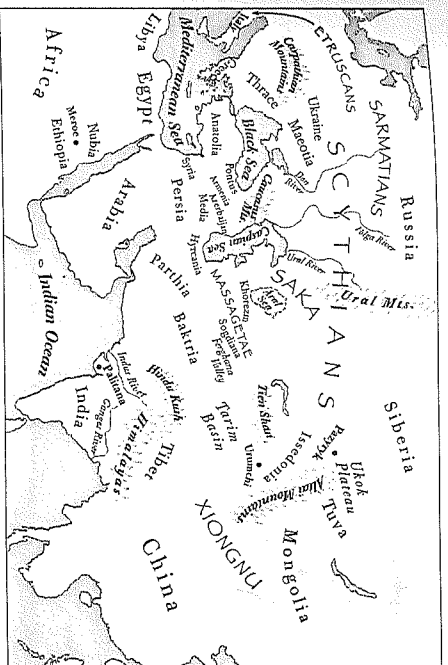
images of Amazons have helmets like those of Greek hoplites; the goddess Athena often wears a similar helmet, but a nude Athena doll is unlikely.) Movable arms and legs allowed the owner to dress this doll in miniature Amazon-style clothing. The doll on the right was discovered in a young girl's grave in Roman-era Asia Minor. About ten inches tall, she wears an imposing helmet, with long hair curling over her shoulder. She is dressed as a classical Amazon, in a belted tunic that exposes one breast, with a studded belt around her waist and across her chest. Articulated legs allow her to "walk." Her broken arm held a bow, spear, or shield. This doll is a remarkable find, for it bears the signature of its maker, Maecius.²⁷ Whether these dolls were treasured toys or ritual figures, the fact that Amazon figurines belonged to girls is striking. They suggest that Amazons were female models available to young women in the classical world.

Did men, women, or both tell the earliest tales—oral traditions—about Amazons and their living counterparts on the steppes? It does not really matter, since the stories spread throughout Hellenic society and every listener—men and women, boys and girls—could understand the message of equality extended to barbarians and even women. Amazon myths and legends offered a vision impossible in Greek society but rumored to exist in a faraway land called Scythia, the Amazon homeland.

SCYTHIA, AMAZON HOMELAND

SCYTHIANS! SOMEWHERE TO THE NORTH AND EAST, beyond the world familiar to the Greeks, restless nomads crisscrossed a landscape of immense emptiness. Expert horse riders, the men and women spent their lives astride tough ponies and nourished their babies with mare's milk. They perfected their deadly aim by shooting at turquoise gems embedded in high rocky crags. They dipped their arrows in the venom of steppe vipers, scalped their foes, and drank from the gilded skulls of their enemies and ancestors. Under the influence of intoxicating clouds of burning hemp, they buried dead companions with their favorite horses and fabulous golden treasures under earthen mounds scattered across the featureless steppes. In Far Scythia, nomadic prospectors braved the desert wilderness to reach secret gold sands guarded by fantastic beaked monsters called griffins. Men and women wore trousers and tattooed themselves with strange designs and stags with towering antlers. The peoples of Scythia were wide-ranging: traversing vast seas of grass and sand, trekking over forbidding mountain passes, and crossing frozen straits. From time to time, waves of these aggressive mounted archers advanced inexorably westward, only to recede back into the steppes.

Evidence exists for all of these attributes ascribed to steppe nomads in Greek literature and art (with the exceptions of target practice with embedded gems and the use of poisoned arrows).¹ For the Greeks, who mostly farmed small plots or lived in towns, the idea of a boundless,



MAP 2.1. Nomadic cultures, Eurasia to China. Map © Michele Angel.

uncultivated sweep of land inhabited by wild "Scythians" was an intimidating notion, arousing respect laced with shivers of anxiety. The earliest Greek vision of "Scythia" emerged from travelers' tales; curious rumors, folklore from Thrace, the Black Sea, and beyond; traders' gossip; and dimly understood facts and garbled descriptions.

"Scythia" was a fluid term in antiquity. For the Greeks, "Scythia" stood for an extensive cultural zone of a great many loosely connected nomadic and seminomadic ethnic and language groups that ranged over the great swath of territory extending from Thrace (another fluid geographic term in antiquity), the Black Sea, and northern Anatolia across the Caucasus Mountains to the Caspian Sea and eastward to Central and Inner Asia (it is more than four thousand miles from Thrace to the Great Wall of China). "The Greeks call them Scythians," wrote Herodotus, the Persians called them Saka (Chinese names included Xiongnu, Yuezhi, Xianbei, and Sai). "Although each people has a separate name of its own," remarked the geographer Strabo, the Scythians, Massagetae, Saka, and other nomadic tribes "are given the general name of Scythians." Pliny named twenty of the "countless tribes of Scythia." As Gocha Tsetskhladze, a historian of Scythia, points out, "We call them Scythians because the Greeks did." There are more restrictive modern descriptions for "Scythians" based on ethnographic, geographic,

and linguistic parameters, but the terms *Scythia* and *Scythians*, the names used by the ancient Greeks, are convenient catchall terms to refer to the diverse yet culturally similar nomadic and seminomadic groups of Eurasia to western China. Modern historians and archaeologists use "Scythian" to refer to the vast territory characterized in antiquity by the horse-centered nomad warrior lifestyle marked by similar warfare and weapons, artistic motifs, gender relations, burial practices, and other cultural features.²

Scythia's forests, grassy steppes, desert oases, and mountains were home to a multitude of individual tribes with their own names, histories, customs, and dialects but sharing a migratory life centered on horses, archery, hunting, herding, trading, raiding, and guerrilla-style warfare. Endless journeys over waterless prairies, invasions, plunder, wars, alliances, agreements, quarrels, more wars: "such is the life of nomads," commented Strabo. Lucian of Samosata (Syria) concurred: "Scythians live in a state of perpetual warfare, now invading, now receding, now contending for pasture or booty." Going by myriad names, waxing and waning in population over the centuries, continually on the move, the Scythian nomads, as described in ancient texts, had a history "inseparable from that of the nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes of the Eurasian steppes." Their common material culture, the "Scythian Triad" of distinctive weapons, horses, and artistic "animal-style" motifs, is evident in archaeological artifacts in burials from the Carpathian Mountains to northern China. Grave goods demonstrate far-reaching trade among these groups.³

Not all of these peoples wandered the ocean of grass under infinite skies, however. By the fifth century BC, seminomadic clans known as the "Royal Scythians" had come to reside in wagons or settlements clustered around the northeastern Black Sea–Don area, taking up agriculture and trade, facilitating exchange between Greece and points along the Silk Routes to Asia. It was mainly through the coastal trading colonies that the Greeks first came to hear of the many different tribes of greater Scythia.

No aspect of Scythian culture unsettled the Greeks more than the status of women. Hellenes expected strict division of male and female roles.⁴ But among nomadic people, girls and boys wore the same practical clothing and learned to ride and shoot together. In small hunting and raiding groups where everyone was a stakeholder and each was

expected to contribute to survival in an unforgiving environment, this way of life made good sense. It meant that a girl could challenge a boy in a race or archery contest, and a woman could ride her horse to hunt or care for herds alone, with other women, or with men. Women were as able as men to skirmish with enemies and defend their tribe from attackers. Self-sufficient women were valued and could achieve high status and renown. It is easy to see how these commonsense, routine features of nomad life could lead outsiders like the Greeks—who kept females dependent on males—to glamorize steppe women as mythic Amazons. The opportunity for an especially strong, ambitious woman to head women-only or mixed-sex raiding parties or even armies was exaggerated in Greek myths into a kind of war of the sexes, pitting powerful Amazon queens against great Greek heroes.

THE GAME OF AMAZONS

For the Greeks, tantalizing scraps of information and legends about women of Scythia—especially the idea of "rogue" groups of female roughriders roaming on their own without men—inspired countless "what if" scenarios. A mythic "alternative world" of Amazons was created from pieces of evidence about the real-world Scythians, who posed a theoretical question of vital interest to a male-centered warrior society like Greece. The sequence might have gone something like this:

- Amazons were warlike women of Scythia or closely associated with Scythians. Scythians were fearsome opponents on the battlefield.
- Unlike docile, sequestered Greek wives, Scythian women lived much like the men. Horse riders, archers, fighters, they were sexually free and *always* armed and dangerous. Imagine facing a hundred Atalanta in battle!
- Thought experiment: What would happen if our Greek heroes encountered a band of Amazons? Sparks would fly!

The Greek thought experiment resulted in an outpouring of thrilling Amazon stories, typically set around the Black Sea. Bards regaled eager listeners with the romantic and military adventures of fictional

Amazons. Myths gave birth to many alternative tales for characters and events, taking details from a core of reality, stoked by curiosity, and embroidered by creative storytelling. The stories were lavishly illustrated in paintings and sculpture. More than a thousand Greek vases depicting Amazons exist today. Even though only a fraction of the Amazon-related art and literature that existed in antiquity has come down to us, what survives still retains the power to enchant.

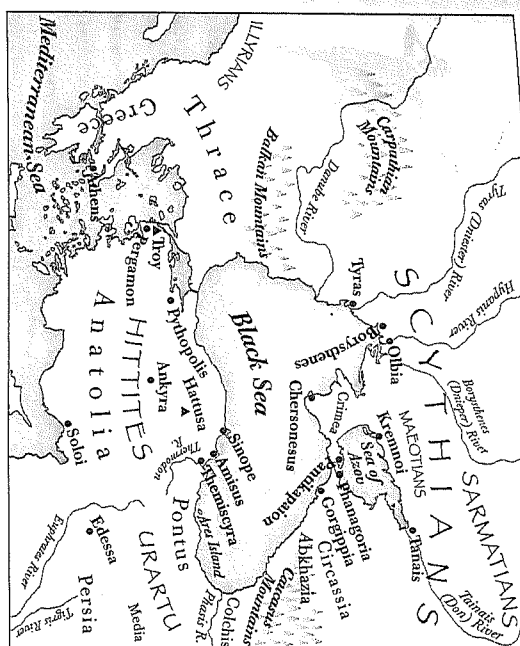
How did the ancient Greeks come by their imperfect but surprisingly detailed knowledge of Scythia? And how did Amazons fit into the picture?

WHO WERE THE SCYTHIANS?

Despite their rich culture (which flourished from the seventh century BC to about AD 500), the Saka-Scythians, Thracians, Sarmatians, and kindred groups left no written histories. What we know about them must be gleaned from other oral, written, or artistic materials, chiefly from Greece and Rome but also non-Greek sources from what is now Iran, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, India, China. The lifestyles of Eurasian nomads in later times can also contribute to our understanding of ancient life on the steppes. Excavations of grave mounds (*kurgans*) began in the 1870s, and every year since then numerous archaeological teams are uncovering more and more evidence, much of it confirming ancient Greek reports and also revealing that Scythian culture was more sophisticated and complex than previously realized (chapter 4).⁵

By the seventh century BC, powerful Scythian forces were attacking, plundering, and exacting tribute in Thrace, the Caucasus, and Anatolia, penetrating south as far as Syria and Media, even advancing toward Egypt and moving eastward toward China. The Scythians' reach contracted again after defeats in the Near and Far East in the sixth century BC, but Scythians continued to dominate the Caucasus and Central Asian steppes.⁶

Scythians were horse people. They traveled extremely long distances by land, much of it harsh going. To reach Thrace or the mouth of the Danube or northern Greece, for example, they would follow a long



MAP 2.2. The Black Sea region. Map © Michele Angel.

southwestern arc down from the steppes. To reach Colchis, Armenia, Anatolia, and Persia from the north, they took one of two major migration routes used by nomads, traders, and invaders from time immemorial. These routes, first described by Herodotus, involved arduous journeys over or around the snow-clad Caucasus range. The Scythian Gates (or Keyhole) was a precipitous, winding mountain trail over the central Caucasus; the journey from the Sea of Azov to the Phasis River in Colchis took about thirty days. The ancient Persians called this narrow defile *Dar-e Alan*, "Gate of the Alans" (Daryal Pass), after one of the nomadic tribes of Scythia. The other difficult and longer passage, sometimes called the "Caspian Gates" or the Marpsian Rock, was between the steep eastern end of the mountains and the Caspian Sea (Persian, *Darbund*, "Closed Gates," modern Derbent, Dagestan). From Pontus (northeastern Turkey) Scythians could cross west into Europe (Thrace) in wintertime over the frozen Bosphorus Strait between the Black Sea and the Sea of Marmara (maps 2.2 and 2.4).⁷

In about 1000–700 BC, Greeks began establishing colonies along the Aegean coast of Anatolia, where they became aware of local histories

and legends about Amazons. Many towns in Anatolia claimed Amazons as their founders; grave mounds and other shrines were local landmarks linked with Amazons.⁸ By the eighth and seventh centuries BC, Greek adventurers began exploring the rim of the Black Sea, which they called the Euxine or simply Pontus ("the Sea"). At some later point "Pontus" came to specify the wedge of land between the Phasis River of Colchis and the Thermodon River of northeastern Anatolia. By the sixth century, Greek colonies were sprinkled around the Black Sea, and by 450 BC more than a dozen Greek colonies were established on the northern Black Sea, from Tyras on the Dniester River to Gorgippia (ancient Sinda), south of the Taman Peninsula, and Tanais, a Scythian trading post at the mouth of the Don River on the Sea of Azov.

Descriptions of barbarian societies of the north and east, many distinguished by a degree of gender role blurring unknown in Hellenic society, began to filter back to Greece as a few traders and travelers journeyed beyond the colonies on the Black Sea, venturing deeper into the lands of nomadic groups, on the steppes, the Caucasus Mountains, around the Caspian Sea, and eastward along the trade routes to the distant Altai Mountains, India, and China. As travelers pushed farther, the stories got stranger, but meanwhile the Royal Scythians who had settled near the Black Sea colonies were becoming more familiar to the Greeks.⁹

Literary and archaeological evidence points to an uneasy relationship between Greeks and Scythians in the Black Sea region in the sixth and fifth centuries BC, followed by a period of lively trade and mutual integration in the fourth century BC. Many slaves in Athens came from Thracian and Scythian tribes, purchased at Black Sea emporiums such as Tanais on the Don (see chapter 6 on Thrace-Scythia links). Meanwhile Greek merchants and travelers carried out commerce and made marriage alliances with Scythian clans. In the fifth century BC, Scythian soldiers and policemen were employed in Athens, but numerous vase paintings and inscriptions about Scythians and Thracians attest to Greek familiarity with their clothing, tattoos, and weapons by the mid-sixth century BC. Male archers and Amazons wearing Scythian-style costumes became favorite subjects on Athenian vases by 575 BC. Some archaic black-figure paintings (575–550 BC) show men fighting on the Amazons' side against Greeks; scholars suggest that these could be either Scythians or Trojans. Around 490 BC, the time of the Persian Wars,

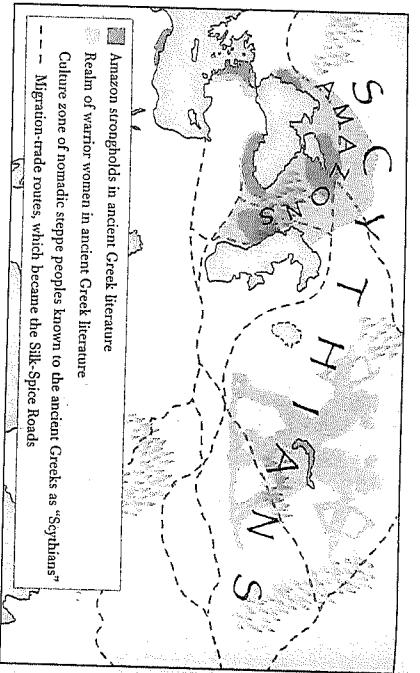
the popularity of male Scythian archers in art faded, perhaps because of their association with Persians (although Scythians were also enemies of the Persians). But female Scythian archers—"Amazons"—never lost their popular appeal in Greek vase paintings and other art forms.¹⁰

Archaeologists now know that "legends about Amazons are reflected in the grave goods of excavated Scythian tombs." The accumulating evidence of female warriors buried with their weapons is leading classical scholars to acknowledge that some Greek beliefs about Amazons were influenced by women who shared the same activities as men in the nomadic cultures of Eurasia.¹¹ But this "novel" insight from modern archaeology—that Amazons were Scythian women—was *already* obvious to the Greeks in classical times. Whatever psychological meanings the Amazon myths may have held in antiquity, a wealth of little-studied literary evidence shows that Greco-Roman authors clearly associated the Amazons with historical, nomadic Scythians at an early date.

AMAZONS: HIGH PLAINS DRIFTERS

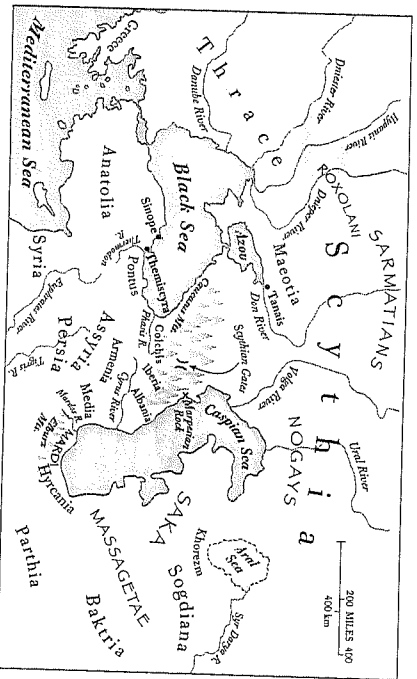
Greek writings about Amazons indicated several different Amazon "habitats" and zones of activity in Scythia. Some sources located Amazons in Thrace and western Anatolia; some placed them in Pontus on the southern shore of the Black Sea; still others put them in the northern Black Sea—Sea of Azov–Caucasus regions; and many writers mentioned more than one locale. Modern scholars have taken this apparent inconsistency as proof that the Greeks were simply making up ecological niches for imaginary beings. In fact, however, this mobile "sphere of influence" for Amazons makes sense. Whether or not the ancient mythographers and historians realized it, the depiction of shifting environments around the Black Sea for the Amazons' home bases, strongholds, migrations, and battle campaigns accurately captured the realities of nomadic life. There is no doubt that at various times in historical antiquity groups of Scythians were present in the various regions designated in classical texts as occupied by Amazons (map 2.3).¹²

In Homer's *Iliad*, for example, King Priam of Troy recalls seeing Amazons in northern Anatolia as a youth. At the beginning of the war with the Greeks, Priam musters his army at a man-made mound near Troy



MAP 2.3. Amazons and warrior women in ancient Greek literature within the context of nomadic steppe peoples of "Scythia" and migration and trade routes. Map © Michele Angel.

said to be the grave of the Amazon queen Myrina. Mound tumuli are scattered across Phrygia, Mysia, and Thrace, and Scythian tomb mounds (*kurgans*) of the seventh–sixth centuries BC exist near Sinope, Pontus. Priam's ally Queen Penthesilea was a Thracian, but she led a band of Amazons from Pontus. The mythic quest of Jason and Argonauts for



MAP 2.4. The Black Sea, Caucasus, and Caspian Sea region. Map © Michele Angel.

the Golden Fleece is at least as ancient in its origins as the Trojan War cycle. According to the *Argonautica* (the version of the myth composed by Apollonius of Rhodes, ca. 280 BC), Pontus and Colchis were occupied by three different tribes famed for women warriors (chapter 10).¹³

In the mid-seventh century BC, the adventurer Aristaeas (from an island in the Sea of Marmara) wrote about his journey east across Scythia to Issedonia and the Altai Mountains. His epic, *Arimaspea* (a Scythian word meaning something like "people rich in horses"), preserved only in fragments, was very influential in forming the early Greek picture of Scythia and Amazons. Aristaeas said that Amazons wandered the iron-rich territory around the Maeotis (Sea of Azov) and the River Tanais (Don). Another lost work, by Skylax of Caryanda (sixth century BC), described the Maeotians, the Sinti (Sinds), and the Sarmatians as "people ruled by women." Several authors referred to Amazons as Maeotides, "people of the Maeotis." (Scythian tribes around the Sea of Azov included the Sinds, Dandarii, Doschi, Ixomatae, and many others.) Other ancient historians placed Amazons and their allied forces among the nomads beyond the Borysthenes (Dniester) River on the steppes north of the Black Sea.¹⁴

Pontus was the Amazon headquarters in another lost epic, the *Theseis*, about the Athenian hero Theseus, probably composed in the sixth century BC. In the fifth century BC, the playwright Euripides located the Amazons in Pontus; so did the poet Pindar, who described Amazons "armed with spears with broad iron points." The play *Prometheus Bound* (Aeschylus, ca. 480 BC) speaks of the "fearless maidens" of Colchis and the Caucasus and the "Scythian multitudes" to the north; it foretells that this Amazon host will "one day settle at Themiscyra by the Thermodon" in Pontus. The fourth-century BC Greek historian Ephorus (from Cyme, named for an Amazon) reported that a faction of Scythians had once left the northern Black Sea and settled in Pontus, becoming the Amazons. The geographer Strabo (first century BC) located various Amazon tribes in the valleys and mountains of Pontus, Colchis, the Don region, and the Caucasus.¹⁵ Instead of evidence for Greek confusion about where to locate imaginary Amazons, these examples represented Amazons as people who roved around the Black Sea. Scythian culture was consistently recognized as the wellspring of the women warriors known as Amazons.

AMAZONS AND SCYTHIANS

A millennium of detailed descriptions of Amazons presented as history began with Herodotus (fifth century BC) and continued through the late antique authors Orosius and Jordanes (fifth–sixth centuries AD). Between the lifetimes of these men, many other Greek and Roman historians also chronicled the origins, rise, and fall of the legendary Amazon “empire.” Each of these writers had access to texts and unwritten traditions that no longer exist today. Their accounts commingle fact and fancy, legend and history, but all identify the women called Amazons as Scythians.

Herodotus, the inquisitive Greek historian from Halicarnassus (Caria, part of the Persian Empire), preserved a treasury of information about the many tribes of Near and Far Scythia, based on personal observations, local histories and legends, and interviews. Admiration for resourceful, self-reliant Amazons is evident in Herodotus’s “historical” account of the origin of the Sarmatians. That story (recounted in the next chapter) tells how a gang of Amazons from Pontus joined a band of young Scythian men from the northern Black Sea and relocated to form a new ethnolinguistic group, a realistic option in the nomadic context of flexibility, alliances, and constant movement around the Black Sea and steppes.¹⁶

About a century after Herodotus, in 380 BC, the Athenian orator Isocrates named the three most dangerous enemies of Athens: the Thracians, “the Scythians led by the Amazons,” and the Persians. Isocrates was harking back to glorious victories when “Hellas was still insignificant.” He reminded his audience that the first Athenians had repelled an “invasion of the Scythians, led by the Amazons.” Isocrates was alluding to the mythic Battle for Athens, which the Athenians treated as a historical event (chapter 17). After their defeat, Isocrates recalls, the army of women did not return to Pontus but went to live with their Scythian allies in the north.¹⁷

The Greek historian Diodorus of Sicily (65–50 BC) also wrote about Amazons, associating them with Saka-Scythian women who were as brave and aggressive in battle as the men. He pointed to the historical example of Zarina, who led a Saka-Parthian coalition to victories against tribes who wanted to enslave them (her story appears in chapter 23).¹⁸

For his research on Amazon history, Diodorus consulted works by Ctesias (a Greek physician who settled in Persia around 400 BC) and Megasthenes (a Greek ethnographer who traveled to India ca. 350–290 BC). According to Diodorus’s sources, after a series of “revolutions” in Scythia, the Scythians were often ruled by strong women “endowed with exceptional valor”; they “train for war just like the men and in acts of manly courage they are in no way inferior to the men.” Many of these women accomplished “many great deeds, not just in Scythia, but in the lands bordering Scythia.”

At some point in the past, Pontus became home to a Scythian group governed by women who rode to war beside their men. One woman (Diodorus does not give her name) possessed extraordinary authority, superb intelligence, physical strength, and battle prowess. This brilliant leader trained a handpicked force of fighting women and began subduing neighboring lands. She founded Themiscyra at the mouth of the Thermodon in Pontus. Filled with pride “as the tide of her fortunes” rose, she began calling herself “Daughter of Ares,” the war god. Under this “kindly ruler beloved by her subjects, young girls were taught to hunt and they drilled daily in the arts of war.” She continued to lead her special army on wars of further conquest, advancing as far north as the Don River.

So far there is nothing incredible in Diodorus’s account of a group of Scythians led by a successful female commander at some point in the distant past. But in the following passage we can glimpse mythography in process, as the plausible is transformed into something more sensational. Ordinary Scythian society is twisted into an ominous “rule of hubristic women” scenario, a reversal of what was normal in the Mediterranean world, bound to titillate Diodorus’s audience. This powerful “queen,” declares Diodorus, enacted new laws that created a true gynocracy in Pontus, in which the women would *always* be sovereign and trained for warfare. She assigned men to domestic tasks, spinning wool and caring for children. She ordered that baby boys’ legs were to be maimed and girls would have one breast seared. From then on, Diodorus tells us, this Scythian tribe ruled exclusively by women was known as the Amazons and their queens were called “Daughters of Ares.”

This first great Amazon queen died heroically in battle. Her daughter (also unnamed) surpassed her mother’s great accomplishments, relates

Diodorus, conquering lands around the Black Sea from the Don to Thrace, and she even made forays south into Syria. For many generations, these queens' descendants continued to advance the Amazon nation in power and fame. Their decline began when the Greek hero Heracles killed their queen, Hippolyte. Then Theseus abducted Antiope and made her his wife in Athens. In retaliation, the Amazons, aided by other Scythians, invaded Greece and besieged the Acropolis. But meanwhile, the native Anatolians they had conquered saw a chance to exploit the Amazons' absence. They united to make war against the few Amazons guarding Pontus. These wars were so successful, says Diodorus, that the great race of Amazons of Pontus was essentially erased from history. Soon the Amazons were so diminished that only a few scattered bands remained. One of these small vestigial bands, led by Penthesilea, helped to defend Troy in the legendary Trojan War.

People "in my day wrongly consider the ancient stories about the Amazons to be fictitious tales," declares Diodorus. He explains why. After the Amazons lost the great Battle for Athens, the surviving Amazons gave up the idea of returning to Pontus, because it was ravaged by wars while they were away. Echoing Isocrates, above, Diodorus says the defeated Amazons accompanied their allies "the Scythians, into Scythia." Thus the great Amazon empire vanished—absorbed back into the steppes of Scythia.¹⁹

Strabo, a well-traveled native of Pontus, also speaks of the Amazons as an ethnic group consisting of both men and women. These people had once lived on the coast of Pontus, "the plain of the Amazons," but were driven out. Strabo reports that some say they still live in the mountains of Caucasian Albania (eastern Georgia and Azerbaijan), while others place them in the northern foothills of the Caucasus. According to Strabo, the Amazon tribe was seminomadic and not all female. "When they were at home, they planted crops . . . and raised and trained horses, but the bravest among them spent most of their time away, hunting on horseback and making war." Strabo's account is another realistic description of a typical pastoral, seminomadic lifestyle, in which men and women could choose to hunt and campaign together or in segregated groups.²⁰

Scythians and Amazons received special attention in a work of the first century BC by Pompeius Trogus, a historian of Celtic roots with encyclopedic knowledge. His lost history was summarized and elabo-

rated by Justin, who probably lived in the second century AD. The Scythians are described as battle-hardened warriors who prized independence and repelled all would-be conquerors. Trogus and Justin are clear that Amazons were *Scythian women*, capable of making war when they chose to. Scythian men and women were equals in heroic exploits, remarks Justin, making it "difficult to decide which of the two sexes had the more distinguished history." Scythian men founded the Baktrian and Parthian empires, he reports, while Scythian women founded the Amazonian empire.²¹

Once when the Scythian men were away for fifteen years making war in Asia, the women sent their husbands a message: If you don't return home we will have sex with the neighboring tribe and the resulting children will carry on the Scythian race. This story appears to refer to the seventh–sixth centuries BC during the Scythians' conquests across western Asia, when there would have been long spans of years when most of the men were away. This theme of Scythian women taking up with other men of their own choosing recurs in many nomadic and Amazon traditions. Herodotus, for example, relates that while the Scythians from the Don region were away for nearly thirty years campaigning against the Cimmerians and Medes, their women "consorted with the male slaves." The women and their new consorts not only raised a whole generation of children to adulthood, but together they created an army to oppose the male warriors when they came home.²²

In Justin's account, the men returned home after receiving their women's message. But in his detailed story of the origin of the Amazons of Pontus we hear about yet another group of resourceful Scythian women whose men had been killed in battle. On the northern Black Sea, wrote Justin, two young Scythians named Plynus and Skolopitus were forced out of their homeland by a faction. They assembled a large band of young men and traveled south over the Caucasus Mountains and occupied Pontus. "From their new base in Pontus, they plundered the nearby lands for a long time." At last, the native peoples rose up. They ambushed and slaughtered most of the Scythian men. "The Scythians' wives now perceived that they were widows as well as outsiders. They took up arms and defended their territory. And then the women went on the attack. They refused to marry, calling it slavery." These women, says Justin, "embarked on an enterprise unparalleled in all history,"

creating and defending a state without men. They even killed the husbands who had survived by remaining at home, so that no woman would seem more fortunate than those who had lost their men. Next they avenged their husbands' deaths by destroying the guilty local tribes. In the peace that followed, they had sex with neighboring peoples so that their bloodline would not die out. The Amazons of Pontus killed baby boys and raised the girls to ride horses, kill game, and train for combat "instead of keeping them in idleness or working with wool" like Greek wives.²³

An earlier fragmentary version of this Amazon origin tale comes from the geographer Skyrmnos of Chios (ca. 185 BC). In his account, a group of Maeotians led by two young men named Ilinus and Skolopius journeyed from the Sea of Azov over the Caucasus and settled in Pontus. After the men were killed by an uprising of the natives, the women took up arms and became successful warriors in their own right. The warrior women were later conquered by the Greeks and dispersed back to the north. These "Amazons and their husbands" migrated back to the land west of the Don and continued to be known as Maeotians. Skyrmnos clearly identifies Amazons as women of Scythian origins.²⁴ (See chapter 22 for a historical warrior queen of the Maeotians, Timgatso.)

The geographer Pomponius Mela, writing in about AD 43, located Amazons on the steppes around the Don, the Sea of Azov, and the Caspian Sea, and also in the vast expanse eastward toward the land of the Seres ("Silk People," China). In Pontus, on the Thermodon plain, a place called "Amazonius" had long ago been an encampment of Amazons when they dominated Anatolia. They had worshipped Artemis at Ephesus and named the town of Gyne on the Aegean coast after the Amazon leader who drove out the native inhabitants (Gyne issued coins showing an Amazon and a prancing horse). The steppes, he wrote, are rich in pastures and they are occupied by the Amazons. The Maeotians around the Sea of Azov are called *Gynaecotatimene* ("Ruled by Women"). The men are archers on foot, while the women ride on horseback and lasso enemies with lariats. There is no predictable age for women to marry, noted Pomponius Mela, because the women remain single until they prove themselves in battle.²⁵

Pliny the Elder, the Roman natural historian writing in about AD 70, uses words and names similar to those used by Skyrmnos and Pomponius Mela. Pliny calls the Sarmatians *Gynaecotatimene* ("Ruled by Women") and also refers to the "Amazons and their husbands." A century later, during the Roman defeat of the Goths in Thrace (AD 270–275), the Romans referred to the captive Gothic women as "Amazons."²⁶

Orosius, a learned and well-traveled Christian historian of the early fifth century AD, consulted numerous classical sources, such as Livy, Tacitus, Diodorus, and Justin, as well as Trogus and other texts that no longer survive, including traditional foundation tales of cities that claimed Amazons in their past. In his *History Against the Pagans*, Orosius tells how the Amazons came to rule in long-ago Pontus. Orosius's history recaps Diodorus's account, above, but supplies proper names and details from Justin's account. Orosius also inserts his own views.²⁷

One of Orosius's important sources was Justin, who reported that the ancient Amazons of Pontus were ruled by a pair of queens named Martesia (Marpesia, "Snatcher or Seizer") and Lampeto (Lampedo, "Burning Torch"). Justin says the courtes divided their all-women forces and took turns leading conquering armies and defending Pontus (Orosius says they drew lots). According to Orosius, Lampedo led the invading Amazon army to subdue most of Thrace and captured some cities of Anatolia, founding Ephesus and other towns. Her victorious army, "laden with rich booty, returned to Pontus. But she found that the other half of the forces that had remained with Queen Marpesia to protect their empire had been cut to pieces in a battle."

Marpesia's daughter, Sinope, succeeded her mother, giving her name to Sinope in Pontus. As a "crowning achievement to her matchless reputation for courage," says Orosius, Sinope remained a virgin to the end of her life. So great was the "admiration and fear spread by her fame" that when Heracles was ordered to bring the weapons of the Amazon queen to his master, he was "certain that he would face inevitable peril." Orosius expected his Christian audience to be shocked and outraged by the "shame and human error" of powerful women of antiquity willfully dominating men, choosing foreign lovers, killing baby boys, building cities, and marching out to conquer. Unlike Justin, who plainly admitted the "unparalleled enterprise" of the women, Orosius is the first ancient writer

to explicitly express disapproval of the “unnatural” state of independent Scythian women who behaved as the equals of men. Yet even Orosius cannot suppress his admiration for the Amazons of yore. In a surprising conclusion, Orosius *praises* the sublime courage of the four greatest Amazon queens, Hippolyte, Melanippe, Antiope, and Penthesilea.

Notably, in 2006, archaeologists discovered magnificent life-size portraits of the famous quartet of Amazon queens, Hippolyte, Antiope, Melanippe, and Penthesilea, in a mosaic floor of the ruins of a villa under a parking lot in ancient Edessa (Sanliurfa, Turkey) (plate 1). The action-packed scenes are unusual because they show the queens hunting lions and leopards instead of making war. The spectacular mosaics at the Villa of the Amazons were made in the fifth or sixth century AD, in the period when Orosius was writing his history of the pagans.²⁸ The power of ancient Amazon stories to thrill had not faded after four centuries of Christianity.

Another author of later antiquity, an Alan-Goth from the northern Caucasus named Jordanes, wrote a fascinating history of the Goths—laced with heaping doses of fiction—in AD 551. Jordanes, who had access to ancient Gothic and Alan traditions, portrayed the Goths, who migrated from Europe to the steppes, as the heirs of the Scythians “whom ancient tradition asserts to have been the *husbands of the Amazons* [my italics].” Here is yet another succinct expression of the ancient understanding of Amazons as Scythian women. Jordanes says that the Amazons once dwelled around the Sea of Azov, from the Borysthene to the Don—and he claims the Amazon queens Marpesia and Lampeto as the ancient “ancestors” of the Goths.

In Jordanes’s Gothocentric version of the old legends told by Justin and Orosius, long ago while the Goth men were away on an expedition, an enemy tribe attempted to carry off the Goth women. But “they made a brave resistance, as they had been taught to do by their husbands.” After routing the attackers, the Goth women “were inspired with great daring.” They took up arms and chose as their leaders the two boldest women, Marpesia and Lampeto. In this Gothic rendition, it was Marpesia who led an army of conquest while Lampeto stayed to guard their native land.

On her campaigns Marpesia and her Amazon army encamped for a long time at the eastern tip of the Caucasus range where it meets the

Caspian Sea (ancient Caucasian Albania, now Dagestan), one of the major nomad migration routes described earlier. This place, says Jordanes, was thereafter called the “Rock of Marpesia.” This legend was already known in the first century BC to Virgil, who calls it the “Marpesian Cliff.” Jordanes lists the glorious conquests across Anatolia and Armenia by the “Scythian-born women who had by chance gained control over the tribes of Asia and held them for almost a hundred years, before returning to their kinsfolk at the Marpesian Rock.” Amazons retained “power in that region up to the time of Alexander the Great” (here Jordanes alludes to Alexander’s meeting with Amazons on the southern shore of the Caspian; chapter 20). By Jordanes’s time—more than a thousand years after Homer and Herodotus—the fame of the warlike Scythian women, called Amazons, evoked such respect and awe that the legendary Amazon queens were claimed as ancestors of the powerful Goths.²⁹

SARMATIANS, A LOVE STORY

IN GREEK MYTH, HERACLES AND OTHER HEROES SET out on an expedition to win the war belt of the Amazon queen Hippolyte. After their victory the Greek ships sailed away loaded with many captive Amazons (including Antiope, destined to become Theseus's wife in Athens). What became of the other Amazon prisoners on the ships? The myth does not tell.

But Herodotus does. Long ago, he relates, a Greek expedition force defeated Amazons at the Thermodon River in Pontus. The Greeks captured as many of the women as they could and sailed off in three ships. The captive Amazons knew they were bound for a life of enslavement and humiliation. Their battle-axes, spears, bows, and arrows, taken as booty, were stowed in the holds of the vessels bearing them away from their ravaged homeland. As the Greek sailors steered toward sunset on the Black Sea, making for the Hellespont and the Aegean, the Amazons secretly got possession of their weapons. Suddenly, the women rose up and lunged at the men. They murdered every Greek and took over the ships.¹

But now what? Amazons were horsewomen, not sailors. At sea, on their own "with no knowledge of boats and unable to handle rudders, sails, or oars, the women were at the mercy of wind and wave." The ships were blown more than five hundred miles north to Kremnoi—the "Cliffs"—a small trading settlement in Maeotia on the Sea of Azov. Since the prevailing winds on the Black Sea in winter are northeasterly, we know it would have been summer when the winds blow from the

southeast (from Pontus it would take about four days to sail there). The Amazons landed in part of the territory of the Royal Scythians.²

The Amazons managed to get ashore with their weapons. They set off on foot, traveling inland. Before long, they came upon a herd of horses grazing. These were apparently semiwild and domesticated horses, left to pasture on their own and rounded up as needed by the local Scythians. Some of the horses had been trained to respond to a rider's knee and heel pressure. We can imagine the experienced horsewomen of Pontus cautiously approaching the horses, the patient process of gentling them, and the happy result. The Amazons "seized these mounts and rode off in search of loot."³

Now the stranded Amazons had fully recovered their accustomed mode of transport—and their freedom. They began pillaging the new territory, resuming their familiar way of life.

The marauding gang on horseback soon caught the attention of the Scythians. The intruders' clothing and speech were not local. Defending their property from what they assumed were boys too young to have beards, the Scythians charged out and killed a few of the raiders. When they retrieved the bodies, however, they realized that the strangers were young women warriors. *Oiopata* ("man-killers," the Scythian word for Amazons; chapter 14). This startling discovery led the Scythians to change their plans. The elders decided to send out a detachment of young men, as many as they estimated were in the Amazon party. How many? Herodotus does not say, so we must guess how many prisoners could have been aboard the Greek ships. Perhaps two dozen, fifty?

The Scythians' orders were not to kill the Amazons but to try to approach them, make friends, and convince them to join the Scythian clan. The young men were to take their cue from the Amazons' actions. If the Amazons pursued them, the men would retreat without a fight. When the Amazons stopped chasing them and set up camp, the men would encamp nearby.

The motive was a desire to have children with these robust, capable women warriors and thereby improve their own stock. The lifestyle of the Royal Scythians around the Black Sea coast had become more settled and their women were soft and weak—they no longer rode out to hunt and fight on their own or with the menfolk, as in the olden days on the steppes.⁴ In their deliberations, the elders saw an opportunity to

rejuvenate their people and recapture lost vigor by bringing the Amazons into the tribe as wives for their young men. But the plan was more than simple nostalgia for old ways. Passionate voluntary sex, among gods, mythic warriors, and superior mortals, was believed to ensure a good time and magnificent offspring (see chapters 8 and 20).

The young men followed their elders' instructions. The Amazons, realizing that they meant no harm, stopped chasing the youths away. Each day, the Scythians bivouacked a little closer to the Amazons, almost as though they were stalking wild creatures that they hoped to befriend, much as the women had acquired their horses earlier.

Each group owned nothing but their weapons and horses, and the men and women lived the same sort of life, hunting rabbits and deer and stealing horses from other groups at will. The Scythian men noticed that around midday, the Amazons would stroll out from their camp, alone or in pairs. The young men followed suit. One day, a Scythian youth came upon a single Amazon by herself. Wordlessly, he made advances and she responded. They made love in the grass. Afterward, the Amazon gestured to indicate that he should return the next day to the same spot—and to bring a friend. She made it clear that she would bring a friend too.

The Scythian returned to his camp and regaled the others with what had happened. Next day, he and a comrade came to the same place and found his Amazon and her friend. After the success of this double date, the rest of the young Scythians and Amazons arranged to meet for sexual trysts. Each man and woman formed special ties with their original partners. After the couples had pair-bonded, says Herodotus, the camps were united and the Amazons and Scythians continued to live together as equals and companions, enjoying riding, hunting, and raiding other groups on the steppes.

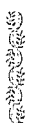
The men failed to learn the women's language. But the women quickly picked up the men's and after some time together they were able to understand each other (chapter 14). How long did this idyllic companionship last? Several months? A year? At any rate, when they were able to communicate with one another, the young men made their proposal. "We have parents and property. Let us give up this way of life and return to live with our people. We promise to keep you as our wives and we will not take up with any other women."

The Amazons' response? "Impossible! We cannot live among your women because we have different customs. We live to shoot arrows, throw javelins, and ride horses, and have no knowledge of women's chores." They knew that the young men's families had settled near the trading centers on the Black Sea coast; their wives stayed in wagons doing domestic work. "Your women never leave home to hunt or explore or for any other reason. We would never be able to live like that."

Rejecting the sorry lot of the Royal Scythian wives, the Amazons of Pontus presented a counterproposal. "If you really want to keep our relationship, and if you wish to do what would be fair and just, then go back to your parents and get your share of belongings and return to us. Then, let us go off by ourselves, and live just as we have been doing."

Significantly, the Amazons were not averse to marriage per se. They proposed a different sort of union based on partnership and parity. The young men were persuaded by their lovers' argument. When they returned with their inherited possessions, the Amazons made another proposal. "We are uneasy about staying in this region. The land is too ravaged from our raids. And we have taken you away from your parents—they might carry out reprisals against us. If you really are resolved to make a new life with us, let us leave this country and head north across the Tanais [Don] River." Their mates consented to this plan.

The band crossed the Don and rode east for three days. Then they turned north, traveling away from the Sea of Azov for another three days. Here on the steppes the new coalition decided to stay. They became known as the Sarmatians. They spoke a hybrid form of Scythian and raised their girls and boys alike. To this day, remarked Herodotus, Sarmatian women and men wear the same clothing; all ride horses at an early age and master the bow and spear. Sarmatian women practice their old way of life, regularly riding out to hunt and skirmish, sometimes alongside the men and other times on their own. Girls do not marry until they have killed a male enemy.⁵



What is especially delicious about Herodotus's account is his sly twist on the concept of "taming." By having sex with the Amazons, says Herodotus, the Scythians "tamed" Amazons. But he uses an unusual, charged

word to capture the attention of his ancient listeners. The Greek term *ektilosanto* is rare and archaic, originally used by Homer and Pindar to mean to make "tractable, tame, docile, or domesticated," usually applied to animals, especially pets or the lead animal of a flock. Herodotus often deliberately selected rare words in order to call particular attention to a point or message. Here his word choice evokes old poetic traditions, emphasizing the epic aspect of the Sarmatian story. This unique term from archaic epic poetry could be a clue that one of Herodotus's sources for this love story was actually a written epic, perhaps the *Arinuspaea*, the famous lost poem about Scythia by the early Greek traveler Aristaeas (650 BC). We know that Herodotus had read the *Arinuspaea* because he cites it in other descriptions of Scythia.⁶

But Herodotus's use of the word "tame" is also ironic and subversive. As we saw, the Amazons tamed the horses, but do the Scythian men really tame the Amazons? The Scythian men deliberate, devise plans, and advance proposals, and the Amazons are proactive too. The women invade and raid the Scythians' property, suggest meeting for sex, learn the men's language, refuse traditional marriage, urge the men to leave their clan and move to new territory, and raise their children alike. Significantly, the women convince the men that the relationship they propose is "fair and just."

Herodotus's Greek audience could not help but notice that these decisions were negotiated among equals, bringing to mind democratic deliberations enjoyed by Athenian males who agree to rule and be ruled in turn. But Greek listeners were also accustomed to zero-sum contests of winners and losers, and in their culture the males dominated females. They tended to assume that if men are strong, then women must be weak, and vice versa.⁷ In this story, however, the surprise answer to the question of who will be dominated and tamed is *no one*. In some barbarian societies with certain admirable qualities, Herodotus suggests, egalitarianism and respect can include women. As classics scholar Carolyn Dewald has pointed out, the story demonstrates "complementarity and mutual adjustments between the sexes." These practical customs of nomad culture persisted among many descendants of the Sarmatians and other steppe peoples into modern times.⁸

Fewer than a hundred years after Herodotus, in about 380 BC, the philosopher Plato cited the examples of the Amazons and the real

Sarmatian women to justify his belief that in the ideal Republic both women and men should serve as soldiers. The philosopher's challenge to his fellow Athenians was this: if barbarian women can fight like men, why not Greek women too? How radical ideas of gender equality might play out in Greek society was also being explored in the theater, for example in Aristophanes's plays *Lysistrata* (411 BC) and *The Assembly Women* (392 BC).⁹

Herodotus's purpose, clearly stated in the first sentence of his *Histories*, was to record the "astonishing achievements of both our own [Greek] people and those of other peoples." Some criticized Herodotus as a "barbarian-lover" for focusing on the histories of non-Greek cultures instead of glorious Greek deeds. Herodotus preserved traditions circulating among the Greek colonists, Greek-Scythians, and Scythians in Olbia, Borysthene, Tyras, and other colonies and outposts that he visited in the fifth century BC; his information about more distant tribes came from his reading and through local contacts, traders, and chains of translators. The narratives were filtered through Greek perspectives, but modern archaeology confirms that Herodotus gathered a lot of genuine information about Scythians.¹⁰

The Sarmatian story was not a Greek myth. It was a Scythian "history," a foundation legend that Herodotus thought would be novel and interesting to transmit to his Greek audience, in keeping with his stated goals above. Yet many classical scholars interpret the Sarmatian legend as a coded account of Greek rites of passage for boys and girls before they entered into traditional Greek marriage, in which males "tame" females through sex. According to William Blake Tyrrell and Frieda Brown, for example, the Amazons of Pontus really represented Greek girls who refuse to become ideal Greek wives and mothers, and the Scythians symbolized both "Greek boys" on the cusp of manhood and "Greek women." In this view, the Sarmatians of Herodotus's story have no historical basis but simply hold up a distorting mirror to Greek culture.¹¹

Such reasoning might make sense if Herodotus had made up the tale or if he were recounting a fantastic fiction *created by the Greeks* about imaginary people and places. But ancient Greek historians, including Herodotus, identified Amazons as real people of Scythia. "Lured on by pastures," wrote Pomponius Mela, the Sarmatians "live in

camp and carry all their possessions and wealth with them. Archery, horseback riding, and hunting are a girl's pursuits." As Herodotus, Melas, and many other writers knew, conquests and defeats within the vast Scythian territories often resulted in the relocation of many different tribes to new lands. The Sarmatians, according to Diodorus's sources, were formed by people transplanted from south of the Black Sea to the northern Black Sea along the Don River.¹² Modern ethnography and recent archaeology provide substantial evidence to indicate that Herodotus and his Black Sea informants were talking about actual nomads who had migrated north to what is now Ukraine and the northern Caucasus, and that the women were freer than Greek women, participating in activities reserved, in Hellenic cultures, for men.

Nomadic groups of various sizes and makeup continually arose, migrated, fought, merged, allied, expanded and diminished, dispersed, and disappeared or were absorbed into other groups in antiquity. The Sarmatians, a loosely related group of tribes, emerged as a force on the steppes between the Don and the Urals around the time that the Greeks were beginning to travel and trade in the northern Black Sea area. Sarmatians spoke an Iranian dialect, related to Saka-Scythic, which evolved into Ossetian, still spoken by people in the north Caucasus. The oral tradition explaining an alliance of a dislocated band of women warriors and Scythian men that Herodotus recorded in about 450 BC could have arisen a century or two earlier, when the Sarmatians first coalesced on the northern steppes. One of Herodotus's known ancient sources, Aristas, was traveling across this region during that time. Aristas was the first Greek writer to identify the Amazons with the Sarmatians, so Herodotus's account may well have derived from Aristas's *Arimaspeia*, as suggested above. Some twenty-five hundred years after Herodotus visited the Black Sea and reported the Sarmatian origin story, European travelers in the north Caucasus, once part of ancient Sarmatia, heard Circassian bards recite traditional folklore with striking similarities to Herodotus's story (chapter 22).

There was nothing inherently impossible about two roaming bands, local males and women from afar, who agreed to unite to form a new group. What else was plausible, perceptive, accurate, or imagined in the incredibly detailed classical descriptions of Amazon and Scythian life?

The next section sorts out the colorful, intricate, tangled threads of fact and fiction about Amazons, beginning with the reality of Saka-Scythian-Sarmatian women, howlegged from riding since childhood and scarred by battle, buried with their weapons and horses in the vast landscape of Scythia.