

Girl power



The Amazons were a mythical race of women warriors who were as beautiful as they were cruel. **Lyn Webster Wilde** travelled to the Steppes of the Ukraine and uncovered some astonishing evidence of their historical reality



KERRICH LESSINIM/ARND

Above: the author on the Black Sea coast with the island of the Amazons in the background
Top right: a wounded Amazon from the frieze of the Artemis altar in Ephesus.

WE STOOD ON THE DECK of the Russian cargo ship and followed the silvery track of the full moon with our eyes. We were heading across the Black Sea to Yalta in the Ukraine on the trail of the women known as the Amazons, who cut off one breast to fire arrows more accurately and lived apart from men. The 5th century Greek Hellenistic described them as "golden-shielded, silver-sworded, man-loving, male-child slaughtering Amazons".

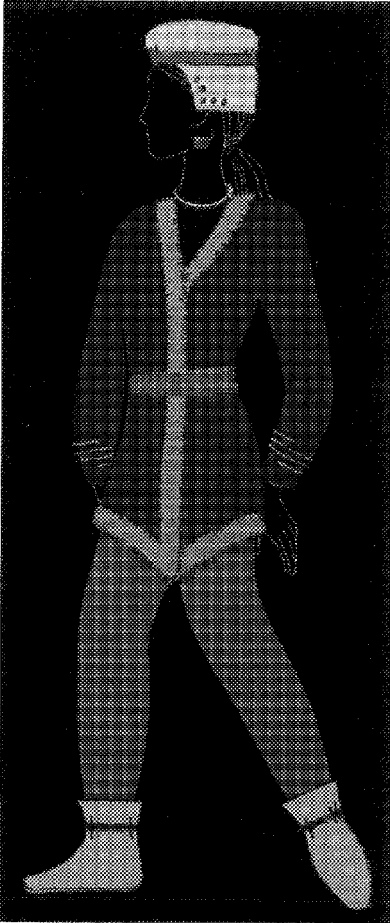
They had made the journey nearly three millennia before, as captives in a Greek galley on their way to a life of slavery – or worse. Defeated by Hercules at the battle of Themiscyra, they lay sleepless in their cabin. This could have been the end of their glorious history of independence, conquest and the founding of cities.

But all was not over. They threw off their chains, slaughtered their Greek captors and took control of the ship. Unskilled in navigation, they drifted for days before reaching shore on the sea of Azov in what is now the Ukraine. Once there, the Greek historian Herodotus

says they settled down with the local Scythians, creating a race called the Sauromatians. Their womenfolk kept up their old customs including the one that prohibited a young woman from marrying until she had killed a man in battle.

It was contrariness which made me go in search of the Amazons. The academic community had decided they didn't exist. "Hittites in kilts probably," snorted one Oxbridge fellow. "An aberration in which I am not at all interested," sniffed an elderly Jungian historian. The theory was that the patriarchal Greeks had invented these women to show the infinite superiority of males: okay, so women could ride, fight and kill, but they could never win. They were depicted as skimpy, smooth-cheeked creatures wearing trousers and pointy hats. Not like the half-naked, ultra-macho Greeks.

The consensus annoyed me. I wondered, in fact, whether any of these scholars had in fact carried out any investigations of the lands where the Amazons were supposed to have lived. I believed that the Amazons had existed in some form, and I was going to prove it.



The Russian cargo ship sailing from Istanbul to Yalta was full of tall fierce-looking women, who had packed their cabins with children's toys, babies' buggies, CD players and other goods from the Turkish bazaars to sell in the markets of her home town. Faced with tough times in the Ukraine, most families have to supplement their income by selling imported consumer goods. Many women are forced into prostitution. Istanbul is full of blonde Ukrainian and Russian women, called "Natashas" by the Turks, who cross the Black Sea to sell their bodies to the Muslim men who both desire and despise them. We had been accosted ourselves and needed to summon all our English frostiness to prove that our height and hair colour did not signify what they thought.

It had been impossible to arrange anything in advance: faxes got lost, e-mails bounced back, secretaries failed to pass on messages. We could not even book our passage on the boat. "Come on the day and if there's room..." was all the shipping company clerk would say. Luckily we were given the last two berths.

Once we had arrived in the Ukraine, we discovered that old style Soviet bureaucracy was alive and well. Natasha had to throw an operatic wobbly in the visa renewal office in Yalta to ensure we were not stuck in a waiting room worthy of Gogol for three days. As the door was being politely shut in our faces, she simply stuck her foot out, flipped it open again and marched in. "You are supposed to be a friendly democracy now, welcoming visitors," she stormed. "You simply cannot treat British ladies like this." I thought we would be thrown out but, within the hour, we had stamps in our passports.

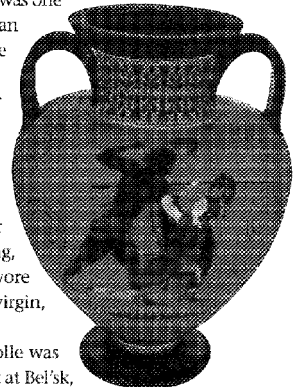
In Kiev, we began to learn about the Scythians. For example, we discovered that when the Greeks built their colonies, such as Chersonesus and Panticapaeum, around the Black Sea from the 7th century BC onwards, the rumbustious, swaggering Scythians drifted in from the steppes and liked what they saw.

Although they were given to bloodthirsty customs such as scalping their enemies and drinking from their skulls, the Scythians rubbed along pretty well with the Greeks and there is little indication of aggression between the two groups. However, there was one very odd thing: 25 per cent of the Scythian warrior graves found in the Ukraine appeared to be those of females.

The amazing discovery was taken for granted by local archaeologists. Costume specialist Lyubov Klotchko had done a drawing, showing the leather cap, trousers, snake bracelet, and most interestingly, the one earring she thought they wore. It seemed that the very young, the very old and the women warriors wore only one earring, possibly indicating a virgin, child-free state.

At the time of our trip, Professor Rolle was digging at the great Scythian settlement at Bel'sk,

Left: a sketch by Ukrainian archaeologist Lyubov Klotchko, showing the costumes she thought the Scythians might have worn. The one earring was a possible indicator of a virgin, child-free state
Below: a Greek amphora from 540 BC, depicting Achilles slaying Penthesilea



I am not an historian, archaeologist, linguist or classicist, but these lacunae did not hold me back. I was going to travel in the trail of the Amazons to prove the academics wrong.

My first break was to find out about the work of a German archaeologist, Professor Renate Rolle, who knew more about the Scythians than anyone else. The Scythians were a semi-nomadic, horse-riding people who roamed the Steppes on the edges of the Greek empire in the 6th and 5th centuries BC, when writers like Lysias and Hippocrates first referred to the Amazons.

Rolle had discovered the graves of women buried with bows and arrows, swords and armour in the steppes of present-day Ukraine. Regardless of whether the war-like women of the Scythians and Sauromatians were Amazon prototypes or their descendants, I needed to know what evidence there was of their existence. Rolle was the key, and I knew she was digging somewhere in the Ukraine. With my Russian-speaking friend Natasha, I planned to visit her.



Left: map showing where many of the Amazon graves were found. In Scythian times, the journey from China to the Black Sea would have taken about three months

in the middle of the steppe near Poltava. Bel'sk flourished in the 7th century BC and had a mixed population – half Greeks and half Scythians. Within it is a huge cemetery, containing thousands of small grave mounds. Rolle was not contactable by phone, which meant we had to turn up uninvited and unannounced. We hired a car and set off in the rain.

In Scythian times, the endless steppe would have been feathery-tipped grassland, scented by sage and other fragrant herbs. The ride from China to the Black Sea would probably have taken three months. Today, the landscape is monotonous farmland, dotted by *kurgans* (burial mounds) left by the various peoples who have visited the area.

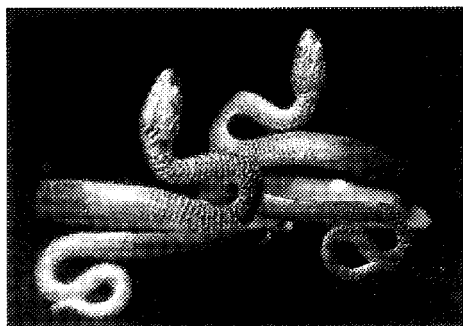
Bel'sk itself was a desolate mudbath, and we could find no trace of excavations or fortress walls. Exasperated, our driver Tolya launched off down a sidetrack; soon we were stuck fast in the mud. But round the next bend, we spotted a lonely figure sitting under a dripping canopy. It was Rolle, writing up her notes. Natasha explained who we were. There was a tense moment until she laughed and her colleague Professor Mursin brought out a bottle of vodka.

Rolle proved to be serious but genial. She and her colleagues kept a goat, chickens, a noisy pig and kittens – all accommodated in the ramshackle farm building around which their tents were pitched. Nearby, she showed us a field full of Scythian shards and bones, as the rain poured down on us. The Amazons still seemed far away. But they were nearer than we knew: Rolle turned out to be one of those incorruptible, unstoppable, persistent and honest people who discover amazing things and then are slow to take credit for them. Finally, we persuaded her to tell her story.

In 1965, as a student archaeologist, she began to notice that the gender of the buried people in some of the graves she was digging was not obvious. The possessions buried with the bodies included both female items such as spindles and mirrors and typical male instruments such as knives, swords or arrows. Previous generations of archaeologists had tended to presume that any body buried with weapons was male.

Rolle started by re-examining a grave found by Count Bobrinsky in the late 19th century: the main burial was of a woman but at her feet lay the body of a young man of about 18 years old. The woman's body had been richly adorned

Right: golden snake bracelets from the Greek colony of Amisos. Such bracelets are often associated with Artemis and the Amazons
Below: the Amazons were skilled riders and used defensive weapons, as depicted by this sculpture in the centre of Berlin



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with jewellery of silver, bronze and glass and next to her lay two spear points and a brightly painted quiver with the remains of 47 arrows. The young man had almost no possessions buried near him.

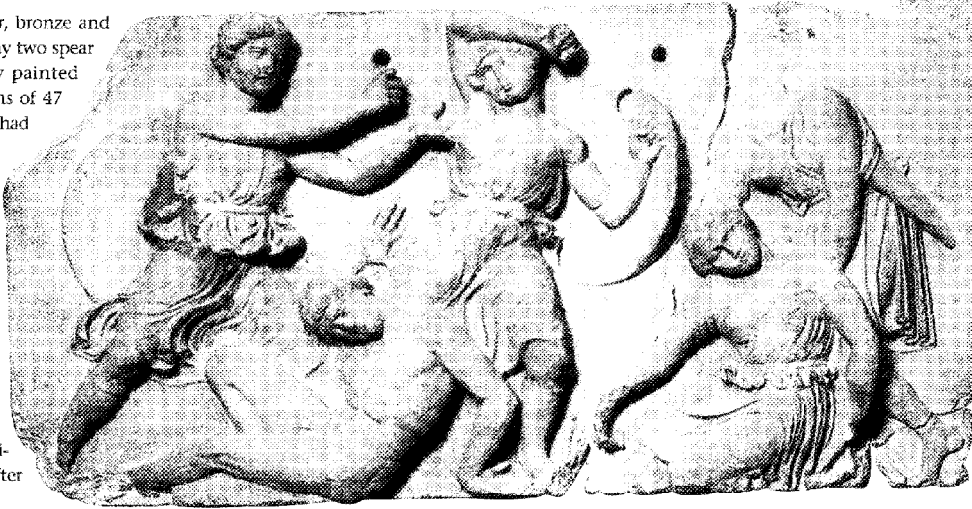
When I first heard Rolle's description of this grave, I felt a chill down my backbone: here we had traces of a world very different from the Greek, a world where a woman might fight and was considered important enough to merit a sacrificed servant to look after her in the next world.

Rolle began to dig herself. In the early 1980s, she was working in Certomylik, in the lower reaches of the Dnieper, a very rich source of Scythian burials. In six of the 53 graves she found women with weapons. "Two hadn't been touched," she told us. "One was a young woman: with weapons, a bow and some arrow-heads, and this little child lying on her arm. The two fingers of her right hand which would have had heavy use from pulling a bow showed clear signs of wear and tear. It was very moving. So you see these women warriors did have children, they led perfectly normal married lives. They only fought when they had to, to defend their settlement, or if there was some particularly ferocious fighting going on."

Rolle studied 100 graves of women with weapons. She was convinced that these women warriors were ordinary, man-loving, child-rearing women, not muscle-bound man-haters. She pointed out that a woman's physique is particularly well suited to horse-riding and distance-riding, and that a skilled bow-woman on horseback is at no disadvantage to a man. "They used the bow - it's a good weapon for a woman because you don't need brute strength to use it, all you need is to be fast and flexible. We know they rode horses. Defensive weapons tend to be heavy, but we've found mail-shirts and armour in women's graves, so we know they used them. And some skeletons show signs of the women being wounded in battle."

According to Rolle, these warrior women would certainly fight when necessary to protect their families and cattle, but they were not separatist "mankillers"; they lived alongside their menfolk, bore children and were buried with make-up as well as swords.

This was only the beginning of my quest to prove that the Amazons had existed, but standing in the mud at Bel'sk I could imagine how the myth of the Amazons had come into being. Greek soldiers billeted at Bel'sk or Chersonesus would have spotted the Scythian women riding into town, with their bows



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and arrows and daggers, wearing trousers and, above all, with a strong and independent attitude. The soldiers would have been impressed, they would have taken stories home of these fierce yet good-looking women who could finish you off if you upset them.

In the Ukraine, the legacy of the women warriors vibrates down the centuries: in Kiev we walked into the Cathedral of St Sophia and were confronted by a gigantic mosaic figure of a woman, standing above the altar with her arms upraised in blessing. Christ was not visible. "Who is that?" I asked a guide. "That is Maria, the goddess of our city," she said. "When the Tartars stormed in here in the 11th century, they saw her and backed straight out again without harming the cathedral." There was no mistaking it, this Virgin Mary was a warrior first, a mother second.

Lyn Webster Wilde, author of On the Trail of the Women Warriors, which has just been published by Constable, is also a broadcaster and filmmaker.

Special offer: *Geographical* readers can order *On the Trail of the Women Warriors* for only £15.99 (normal price £18.99) plus £1.25 (UK) and £4.35 (overseas) for postage and packaging. Please send cheque (made payable to *Geographical*) to Book Offer, *Geographical*, 47c Kensington Court, London W8 5DA.

Above: part of the Bassae Frieze which is housed in the British Museum and dates back to 420 BC. Skeletons of women found in Scythian burial grounds show signs of being wounded in battle