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.

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 Herodotus 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 Themiscrya, 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 Arc 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. “Furies in kilts probably,” snorted one Oxford bridge 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-raised, 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.
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 they were the women of the Scythians or Sarmatians, 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.

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 were 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 Belok.

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In the middle of the steppe near Poltava, Belšk 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 festively-raped 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 keepers (burial mounds) left by the various peoples who have visited the area.

Belšk itself was a desolate mudbrick town, and we could find no trace of excavations or fortress walls. Exasperated, our driver Tolym 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 Murin 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 Bobrin 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...
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
Rolie’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 sacri
cfied servant to look after
her in the next world.

Rolie began to dig herself. In
the early 1980s, she was working in Cotomolok, in
the lower reaches of the Dniester, a very rich source of
Scythian burials. In six of the 51 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.”

Rolie studied 100 graves of women with weapons.
She was convinced that these women warriors were ordi
nary, 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
ride 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 Rolie, 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 Belšč I could imagine how the myth of the
Amazons had come into being. Greek soldiers billeted
at Belšč or Chersonesus would have spotted the
Scythian women riding into town, with their bows
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 gigan
tic mosaic figure of a woman, standing above the altar
with her arms upstaged 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
hacked straight out again without harming the cathed
ral.” 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.

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.

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
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