



Wonder Woman And The Myth Of The Mighty Amazons

Jim Willis



The names Thessalia, Hippolyta, Antiope, and even Princess Diana of Themyscira, better known as Wonder Woman are not unknown, even though up until recently only the romantics believed in their existence. They are Amazons, women warriors who were given mythological immortality by the

Greeks. Every Greek warrior, from Hercules on down, had to prove his mettle by going up against an Amazon and emerging victorious from the battle. It was a rite of passage. But no one really believed they ever really existed. Until now.



Battle of the Amazons by Peter Paul Rubens (1617) Web Gallery of Art (Public Domain)

Adrienne Mayor, in her book, *The Amazons: Lives and Legends of Warrior Women across the Ancient World*, has drawn attention to recent archaeological discoveries that seem to

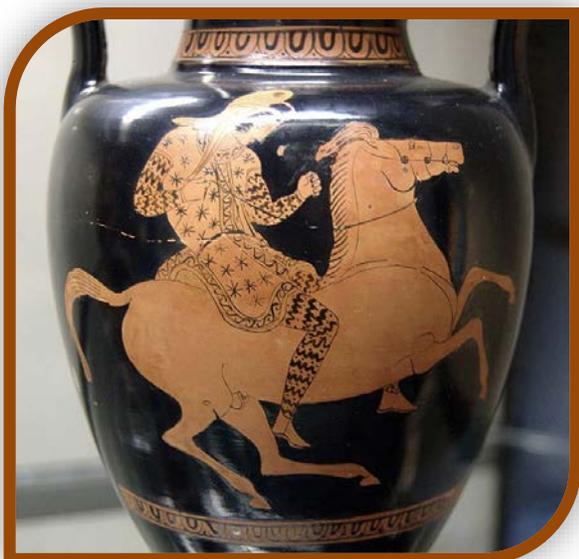
prove, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that something like Amazons existed and may have been every bit as fierce as their reputations suggested. *“As Princess Diana of Themyscira, Wonder Woman is of Amazonian blue-blood. Formed from clay by her mother, Queen Hippolyta, and given life by the breath of Aphrodite, she is a demi-god. The gifts she receives from the gods of the Greek pantheon explain her superhero powers, which become evident when she transforms into Wonder Woman...Overwhelming evidence now shows that the Amazon traditions of the Greeks and other ancient societies derived in part from historical facts.”*



Amazons and Scythians, by Otto van Veen, (pre 1629) Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (Public Domain)

Scythian Burial Mounds

While excavating Scythian burial mounds, archaeologists routinely uncovered evidence of Kurgans—nomadic, horse-centered warriors—including human bones found from the Black Sea to the steppes of Mongolia. To be able to fight from horseback, a unique weapon technology is required. Bows have to be shorter and more powerful in order to shoot arrows on the run over the head of one's mount. Such bows and arrows are regularly found in burial mounds. It was just assumed that their owners were male warriors. But now the science of DNA testing has become a regular tool in the archaeologist's arsenal, and, as it turns out, at least one third of the bodies found were those of women warriors.



Riding Amazon in Scythian costume, Attic red-figure vase, c. 420 BC, Staatliche Antikensammlungen, Munich (Public Domain)

On horseback, a trained female warrior can be just as deadly as a male warrior, and maybe even prove to be a little faster and more maneuverable, due to the lighter weight the horse has to carry. Along with bows and arrows were found knives and daggers. Again, speed is more important than physical bulk when using weapons such as these. Archaeologists call them Scythian burial sites because that is what the Greeks called them. Scythians roamed the area north and east of the Mediterranean Sea

and were a feared and respected people. But history prefers the name Amazon for reasons which have nothing to do with geography.

Mutilated Breasts?

The Greek historian Hellanikos, in the fifth century BC, made a linguistic mistake that has been repeated innumerable times since. It is now so common that no one really thinks about it. The word *mazon* sounds like a Greek word meaning 'breast'. The prefix *a* signifies 'lack'. Therefore, at least according to popular history, *Amazon* means 'without breast'. This was a reference to the fact that Hellanikos thought Amazon warriors cut off their left breast so it would not interfere with the act of drawing and firing a bow and arrow. This is patently ridiculous, of course. Female archers today have no problem shooting a bow. And the word Amazon probably is not even Greek in the first place. It is most likely Iranian, or even Caucasian. But once a titillating concept takes hold in popular imagination it is hard to shake it. To be sure, Linda Carter, the actress who portrayed Wonder Woman, the Amazon princess, on the television series, and Gal Gadot, who recently took over the role on the big screen, are probably both glad the producers did not take the legend too literally.

A hippeis rider seizes a mounted Amazonian warrior armed with a labrys by her Phrygian cap. Roman mosaic emblema from Daphne, a suburb of Antioch-on-the-Orontes. (Fourth century AD) the Louvre, Paris. (Jacques Massot / CC BY-SA 4.0)



Another popular misconception, no doubt fueled by modern sexual mores, was that Amazons were lesbians who only captured men so as to produce the next

generation of warriors. Here again, history just does not stand up to legend. The Greeks had no trouble at all when it came to conducting open and honest discussions about sexuality, and there is absolutely no suggestion in antiquity that Scythian warriors were anti-male or male-hating lesbians, as popular mythology asserts. Adrienne Mayor points out that she did discover: “... a vase that shows a Thracian huntress giving a love gift to the Queen of the Amazons, Penthesilea. That is a strong indication that at least someone thought of the idea of a love affair between Amazons. But just because we do not have any written evidence, and only that one unique vase, does not preclude that Amazons might have had relations with each other. It is just that it has nothing to do with the ancient idea of Amazons”.



Apparently, the whole lesbian-Amazon connection began with Marina Tsvetaeva, a Russian poet. She believed that Amazons were symbolic of lesbianism in antiquity. The idea grew from there, perhaps because it peaked male interest.

Heracles Obtaining the Girdle of Hyppolita by Nikolaus Knüpfer (1650) Web Gallery of Art (Public Domain)

Pot Smoking Amazons

The Greek historian Herodotus told the story of Scythian warriors sitting around a fire and throwing plants or seeds unto the flames. Everyone became intoxicated when they inhaled the smoke. This sounds a lot like a pot party, and may actually have some verifiable archaeological evidence. Apparently, every Scythian burial discovered so far, both male and female, contains a hemp-smoking kit, complete with small charcoal brazier. Herodotus says the people would build a small sauna tepee, go inside, light a fire, and get high. They also drank fermented mare's milk. Mayor includes a recipe in her book, but warns people not to attempt to make it at home. Tattoos seem to be big in Amazon circles. Both men and women sported them in abundance, usually geometric shapes or animal images. Tattoo kits are also often found in Scythian burial sites.



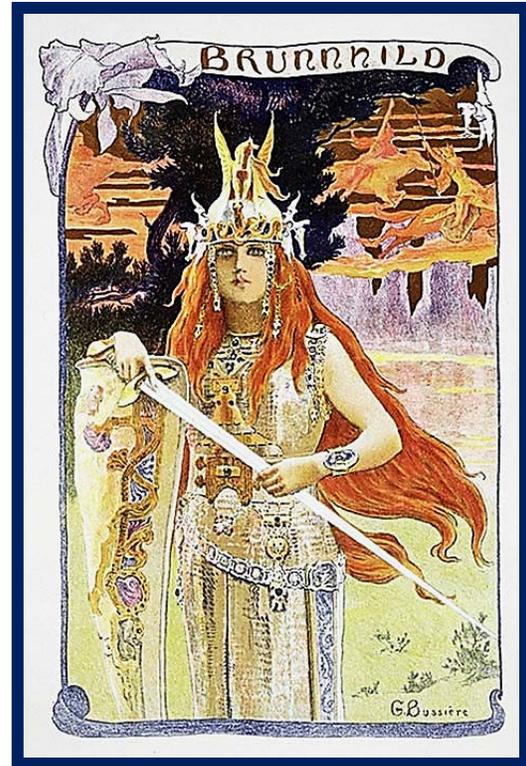
*Amazon wearing trousers and carrying a shield with an attached patterned cloth and a quiver. Ancient Greek Attic white-ground alabastron (c. 470 BC)
British Museum, London. (CC BY-SA 2.5)*

Who Wore The Trousers?

Surprisingly, it was probably women who invented trousers. The idea of wearing pants can be traced in mythology back to Medea, either a sorceress or princess, maybe even both, from the Caucasus region. Both the Scythians and the Persians later adopted the concept. When one stops to think about it, it makes sense. Trousers work better than robes when it comes to riding a horse. If these stories are true, men must henceforth credit the idea of wearing the pants in the family to women warriors. The Greeks thought trousers were an abomination, worn only by barbarians.

When one adds up all these archaeological indications, it would appear that, as is so often the case, there is a kernel of history at the core of the mythology surrounding Amazons. This is not a new concept, either. Amanda Formen, in the April 2014 edition of *Smithsonian* magazine, points out that in 1861, a Swiss law professor and classical scholar named Johann Jakob Bachofen published what was then a radical theory that the Amazons were not a myth, but a historical fact. He wrote that humanity started out under the concept of matriarchy and switched to patriarchy at the beginning of civilization. Bachofen believed, however, that world domination by men was a necessary step toward progress. Women only understood what he called 'the physical life'. In his words: "*The triumph of patriarchy brings with it the liberation of the spirit from the manifestations of nature.*" For a someone who started out with a good idea, Bachofen really went off the rails very quickly. In his defense, he lived back in 1861, but still.

"Brunnhild" by Gaston Bussière (1897) (Public Domain)



Wagner's Valkyries

The composer Richard Wagner was fascinated with legends about Amazon warriors. Brünnhilde and her Valkyries are classic examples. So, it does not come as a surprise that Wagner was a student of Jakob Bachofen. So was Friedrich Engels. Bachofen was required reading for a whole generation of Marxist and feminist theorists. They wrote about a pre-patriarchal age when *"the evils of class, property and war were unknown."* In *Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State* Engels wrote: *"The overthrow of mother-right was the world historical defeat of the female sex. The man took command in the home also; the woman was degraded and reduced to servitude; she became the slave of his lust and a mere instrument for the production of children."*

Many today would agree with this sentiment, but unfortunately there is very little evidence that such a utopian matriarchy ever existed. There are hints, found in various archaeological sites around the world, that societies did exist which demonstrated a much more balanced gender relationship than is usually the case. But as of now, the verdict is still out. So, the idea of

matriarchy still awaits historic reality, but the quest for gender balance might explain history's fascination for Amazon mythology.



A 19th century interpretation of Penthesilea fighting, by Arturo Michelena (Public Domain)

Antianeirai

One would like to think the Amazons were more than just Scythian warriors who could ride and shoot a bow. At the same time, male titillation with female dominance adds another layer to a legend that goes back all the way in time to Homer's first mention of the Amazons in the *Illiad*. He called them *antianeirai*, which can be translated from the Greek as meaning anything from 'antagonistic to men' to 'the equal of men'. No one knows for sure what he meant.

However, the legend took on an identity of its own. Amazon warriors were said to have fought in the battle for Troy on the side of the Trojans. The Greek hero, Achilles, took on Penthesilea, an Amazon queen, and killed her in single combat. He fell in love with her the moment she died. Hercules' ninth task was to steal a magic girdle from the Amazon queen Hippolyta. Athens could not arise until the brave Greek warriors had defeated the Amazon hoards, a result, by the way, that thereafter justified the subjugation of women in Greek society. Plutarch, a Greek historian, later recorded these words: The Amazons "... were no trivial nor womanish enterprise for Theseus. For they would not have pitched their camp within the city, nor fought hand-to-hand battles in the neighborhood of the Pynx and the Museum, had they not mastered the surrounding country and approached the city with impunity. As ever, though, Athenian bravery saved the day".

It is probably no accident that Greek depictions of heavily armored Greek warriors fighting scantily clad Amazon warriors was repeated down through history. In an epic battle scene from the 2004 movie *King Arthur*, Arthur, played by Clive Owen, and his knights of the Round Table, go to battle against the invading Saxon hoards. They are dressed head to foot in heavy metal armor. Guinevere, played by Keira Knightley, fights right alongside them—a personification of the prototypical Amazon warrior. She, however, is wearing a bikini. Even Wonder Woman wore more clothes than that.



Battle of the Amazons by Anselm Feuerbach (1873) Nürnberger Opernhaus (Public Domain)

So, the legend of the Amazon Warriors has to be listed alongside mythologies of lost civilizations. Did they ever exist as a separate civilization, set apart and in opposition to other ancient civilizations? Probably not.

Ancient Women Warriors and Hunters

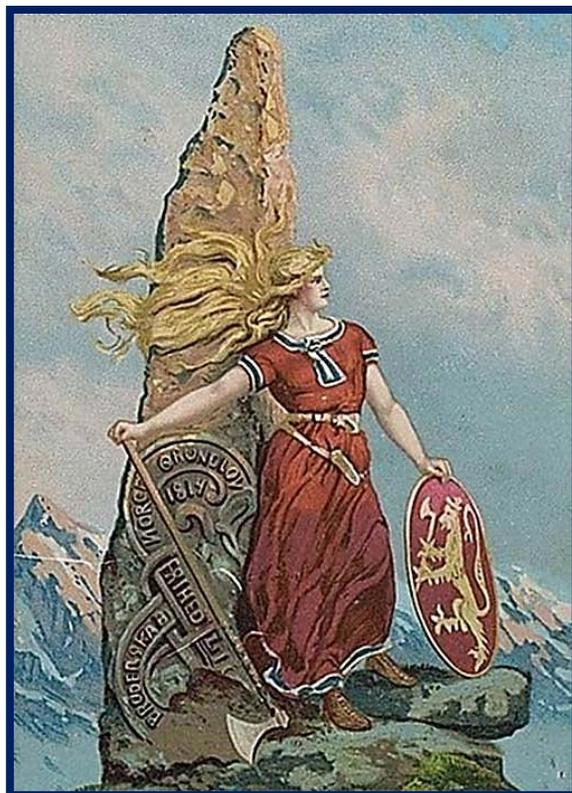
But is there evidence that women once fought alongside men and even contributed to a wealth of technology such as wearing pants, being tattooed, and maybe even getting high once in a while, instead of simply inventing agriculture, minding the home fires, and watching the children? Most definitely, but, as is usually the case, interpreting history is never a simple task.

Recent archaeological discoveries add more layers to the mystery. It now appears that woman warriors, or at least big-game hunters, were not confined to the Middle East. In an article for the *New York Times*, “*What New Science Techniques Tell Us About Ancient Women Warriors*,” published on January 1, 2021, author Annalee Newitz points to evidence that as far away as the Americas, “*women have been leaders, warriors and hunters for thousands of years.*”

In November 2020, a paper published in the journal *Science Advances* described recent studies conducted on the skeletal remains of a big-game hunter who lived in the Andes some 9,000 years ago. Found with the grave remains was a specialized tool kit that anthropologists have long identified with the hunting of large animals. There were projectile points, scrapers for tanning large hides, and a hunting knife. All this was fairly typical for the period. But then scientists decided to analyze tooth enamel using forensic methods that reveal whether the body carried a protein called amelogenin. It turned out that the hunter was a female. This piqued their curiosity enough to cause the examination of other bodies that had been all diagnosed as coming from this same period. Of 26 graves containing similar tool kits, 10 were determined to be women.

Romanticized depiction of a Viking woman by Andreas Bloch (1905)(Wikimedia Commons)

Bonnie Pitblado is an archaeologist working out of the University of Oklahoma in Norman. She made clear to *Science Magazine* that “*women have always been able to hunt and have, in fact, hunted.*” All this new data completely upends the long-held anthropological dictum that, in the past, men hunted while women stayed home to gather and tend the children. It now seems as though this dogma is rooted in gender bias, not solid archaeology.



This new material is not confined to the Andes, either. It does not indicate a purely local bias. When examined with fresh eyes, freed from historical blinders, the remains of a tenth-century Viking warrior discovered in Sweden by Hjalmar Stolpe, buried with a sword, two shields, some arrows, and two horses, was, in fact, that of a woman warrior. Skeptics immediately issued accusations of revisionist history, but it is hard to argue with facts, even though they fly in the face of such ensconced prejudice. The bones of the body carried, unequivocally, two X chromosomes. Armed with this evidence, more skeletons were examined and re-labeled. And the hunt was just beginning.

Returning to the Americas, this time to southwestern Illinois, the mound city of Cahokia, dated to more than a thousand years ago, revealed more evidence. The burial of what was thought to be two high-status males, complete with a treasure trove of valuable grave goods, has recently revealed that one of them was male, the other female. Both skeletons, along with others nearby, seem to have been given equal status. Perhaps Thomas Emerson, working with the Illinois State Archaeological Survey, said it best: *“We don’t have a system in which males are dominant figures and females are playing bit parts.”*



*Amazons by Károly Kernstok (1910)
(Public Domain)*

Modern Bias

It is a romantic notion to think that Amazons and Valkyries once ruled tightly-knit, peaceful matriarchal societies. The recent Wonder Woman movies inspire these dreams. But new findings do not imply such fantasies. They do, however, point out a fallacy equally as strong.

Modern ideas about gender roles are not to be found in the archaeological record. They represent, rather, a present-day bias that has been superimposed over the historical narrative. It may be a bias that, in some cases, is thousands of years old, but even that amount of time is merely a small parenthesis in the great sweep of history. It is entirely possible that the vast amount of human time on earth was spent free of such bias. If the new data teaches anything, it is that prejudices are harmful and misleading when one assumes things have always been as they are now. Given this point of view. Maybe Wonder Woman can teach us something after all.

Top Image: Amazons by Johann Heinrich Wilhelm Tischbein (1820) (Public Domain)

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