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Amazons in the Scythia: new finds at the Middle Don, Southern Russia

V. I. Guliaev

Abstract

New archaeological evidence from the territory of ancient Scythia suggests that stories of the legendary Amazon warriors were not a simple myth or fantasy.

Keywords

Amazons; Scythians; barrow (burial-mound or kurgan); warrior women; Herodotus; weapons.

The Scythian period, seventh to third centuries BC, is the most evocative epoch in the history of the peoples and tribes who inhabited the vast territories of Eurasia between the Altai mountains on the east and Thrace on the west. However, according to the information of some ancient authors, the proper Scythians (or European Scythians) lived in the steppe and forest-steppe zones of the northern Black Sea coast, between the Danube and Don (Tanais) rivers. We know little of the real history of the Scythians. The famous Greek historian Herodotus (fifth century BC) tells us that they arrived at the northern Black Sea coast in the seventh century BC from a mysterious place in 'Asia', and were similar in their language and culture to nomadic Iranian tribes.

It is suggested that, with time, the Scythian kingdom fell into decay. On the west, Scythian territory was lost to Philip of Macedonia, but a greater threat impinged from the east. The innumerable nomadic tribes of the Sarmatians – very similar to the Scythians in language and culture – crossed the Don River at the end of the fourth century BC and moved westward, subjugating the Scythian territories step by step. And this mighty wave of nomadic hordes eventually annihilated even the memory of the Scythians, who were fully absorbed in a new victorious nation – the Sarmatians.

The European Scythians had very close connections with the classical world. Their enduring contribution resulted not only from their role in disseminating elements of high Hellenic culture to the depths of Eurasia, but also from the creation of their own original and highly evolved civilization. The famous Scythian 'triade' – advanced forms of

armament and horse trappings and the distinctive 'animal style' art – were widely circulated among many nomadic and sedentary tribes of the steppe and forest-steppe zones from the northern border of China to the territory of modern Hungary.

This contribution explains the pervasiveness of the Scythian theme within Russian archaeology. However, after 200 years of excavations, many important problems of the Scythian past remain unresolved. Central to these is the mystery of the Amazons. To address this problem we can use three kinds of sources: texts by ancient authors, rich Graeco-Roman iconography (painted pottery and sculpture), and archaeological material.

More than twenty-five centuries ago the miraculous legend of the Amazons appeared in the writings of some classical scholars and writers. These fabulous women-warriors apparently lived separately from men and, by the standards of the ancient world, had very strange customs. Originally, their motherland was located in the north east of Asia Minor, on the southern coast of the Black Sea, between Sinop and Trabzon. The Amazons bravely confronted every enemy and seldom experienced defeat on the battlefield. According to these texts, the Amazons killed all male prisoners eventually, but sometimes only after children had been conceived. When occasionally boys were born to Amazonian women, they were driven out of the Amazonian land. The girls were trained in the severe 'spartan' mode – as warriors and horsewomen.

What kinds of weapon did the Amazons have at their disposal? According to the ancient writers and iconographic evidence, the basic arms of the female fighters were bows and arrows, darts, spears, and also double battle-axes. Among the defensive weapons, the Greek authors mentioned shields in the form of a half-moon, battle-belts, and Hellenic bronze helmets (Miroshina 1995: 6).

The Amazons were closely connected with horses. In the written records they are described not only as brave warriors, but at the same time as skilful equestrians. The great role of the horse in the life of the Amazons is demonstrated vividly by the names of three legendary Amazon queens: Lisippa, Hippo, and Hippolita (Johns-Blay 1997: 70).

Herodotus claimed that on one occasion the Greeks had defeated the Amazons near Thermodon, in Asia Minor. After the battle the proud victors sailed for home with many female prisoners aboard. However, on the open sea the women-warriors rebelled and killed all the Hellenes. But the Amazons were poor sailors and during a storm they were cast up on the shore of the land of the Scythians, on the northern coast of the Sea of Azov. There, these militant females fought the Scythians, who, after understanding that their enemies were women, dispatched some young men to the Amazons to establish intimate relations. This plan was apparently very successful. The Scythian youths and the pregnant Amazons intermarried and formed a new tribe – the Sauromatians – who settled in the steppe between the Don and Volga Rivers. In Sauromatian society the women enjoyed special and very high status. The Scythians called them '*oiorpata*' – 'the killers of men'.

Herodotus reported that, after this, the women of the Sauromatae followed their ancient customs. They rode out hunting, with their men or without them, they went to war, and they wore the same dress as the men. The language of the Sauromatae is Scythian, but not spoken in its ancient purity, since the Amazons never learned it correctly. With regard to marriage, Herodotus claimed that the custom was that no virgin was wed until she had

slain a man of the enemy; and some of them grew old and died unmarried, because they could not fulfill the law (Herodotus III–IV: 116–17).

At first sight this description of militant Sauromatian women seems rather fantastic or improbable. As a result, the legend of the origins of the Sauromatian people was unpopular among scholars for a long time. However, intensive explorations of Sauromatian kurgans (barrows) in the Volga and Ural regions during the 1960s and 1970s radically changed our views on the tales of some classical authors. The ancient myth was suddenly verified by the proof of rich female graves containing full sets of weapons and horse trappings.

The extraordinary material honours that were paid to these deceased women are a clear indication of the deep respect for women in Sauromatian society, and perhaps even the belief among this tribe in the Mother Goddess (Mother Ancestor) cult. The Sauromatian females were not only brave warriors, they also held many religious and ritual functions. Only female burials contain portable stone altars and bone spoons adorned with the figures of beasts – evidently ritual objects. And, at the same time, very often we find in these graves a full set of weapons.

However, our story of the Amazons does not finish at this point. It is significant that the classical written tradition, beginning with Herodotus, firmly connected the Amazons not with the Volga-Ural area, where numerous graves of Sauromatian females with weapons were uncovered, but with the region of the northern coast of the Azov Sea and, especially, the Don (Tanais) River.

The Amazons lived around the Tanais, wrote Ammian Marcellin. Pseudo-Plutarch told us that the Tanais was earlier called ‘the Amazon river’, because the Amazons had often bathed there. It is significant also that these ancient writers considered the lands along the Azov Sea and the Tanais as belonging to the Scythians, but not to the Sauromatians. It is evident therefore that some typical customs of the Amazons must be reflected in the inhabitants of Scythia proper.

We are dealing here with a rather strange contradiction. According to Herodotus, the Amazons arrived from their legendary homeland in Asia Minor by sea to the shores of the Black and Azov seas, and inevitably must have found themselves in the territory of the Scythians. But some scholars continue to argue that the true Amazons were only Sauromatian women (female burials with weapons in Volga-Ural region).

The situation began to change only in recent times, when, owing to large-scale archaeological investigations in the territory of former Scythia, numerous burials were discovered containing the remains of female warriors similar to the Sauromatian ones. By 1991, archaeologists had uncovered more than 112 graves of women with weapons in the area between the Danube and Don Rivers. According to anthropological sexing, about 70 per cent of these interments belonged to young women aged between 16 and 30 years old (Fialko 1991: 8–11).

Kurgan 16, near Akkerman (South Ukraine), is the most impressive example of the burials of this kind. One female skeleton was uncovered, accompanied by diverse and numerous mortuary offerings: bronze and silver bracelets, a bronze mirror, a necklace of glass beads, a lead spindle-whorl, wooden vessels with the remains of the funeral food, a quiver with twenty bronze arrowheads, two spear-heads, and a massive battle-belt (leather covered with iron plaques). Several head wounds were discerned on the skull of

this woman, resulting from cutting blows, and one bronze arrowhead was found inside the knee joint (Rolle 1989: 29).

In the principal grave of kurgan 13, near the city Ordzhonikidze (Ukraine), the bones of a woman with a bronze arrowhead at the left knee were discovered. It was evidently a battle wound. Apart from purely female objects (bronze mirror, iron awl, some ornaments) there were also seven bronze arrowheads and an iron spearhead. Beside this woman warrior two children were laid (an infant baby and a boy of 7–10 years old). This fact – the presence of two children in the grave of a female warrior – is changing our previous ideas about the Scythian Amazons. The presence of children suggests that the Amazons were not just young virgins, but that their group included childbearing women also (Terenzhkin and Illynskaya 1983: 179). Nevertheless, the majority of these warrior women, according to anthropological criteria, were relatively young people.

The Ukrainian archaeologist Elene Fialko has reached the following conclusions on the basis of all available data (to 1991) concerning female burials with weapons from the territory of the steppe and forest-steppe Ukraine (more than 112 graves): ‘Weapons were represented by arrowheads of various types (almost all of bronze), iron points of spears and darts. Very seldom were swords uncovered in female burials, and never battle-axes’ (Fialko 1991: 12).

Defensive armour occurs in the Amazon graves of Scythia but only very rarely: three burials contained battle-belts (with bronze and iron plaques), and in one case the interment of a girl (7–10 years old) was accompanied by iron armour and two spearheads. The latter is unique not only in terms of the children’s burials, but for the adult female graves also (Fialko 1991: 11). Elene Fialko proposes that the Scythian warrior women should be considered as participants in special, lightly armed detachments of the Scythian army during the fifth to fourth centuries BC (Fialko 1991: 13).

As to their dress, some burials of local Amazons contained the remains of conical caps or head-dresses made of felt; they are very similar to those which were described by the classical writers and represented by Greek painters and sculptors on the numerous portraits of Amazons (see Chernenko et al. 1983; Davis-Kimball et al. 1995; Mallory 1996; Rolle 1989). It should be noted that, alongside the weapons, these Amazon graves contain a full set of purely female objects: clay and lead spindle-whorls; bronze mirrors; bracelets, rings, earrings, and necklaces made of bronze, gold, silver and glass; and pieces of pottery – local and imported Greek pottery.

In contrast with the usual Scythian female burials, the graves of women-warriors are always the principal (primary) burial inside the kurgans and not intrusive, secondary burials. Thus, the native Amazons were equal in this sense with burials of male warriors (Illynskaya 1966: 169). In some cases, the kurgan (barrow) was encircled with a special ritual moat. There are also some traces of commemorative feasts in the form of amphorae fragments and animal bones on the surface or inside the kurgan embankment, and also in the circular ritual moats. Funeral food was nearly always placed at the Amazon graves – parts of the carcasses of horses, sheeps, and cows – together with an iron knife. The same ritual is also typical for all male graves (Fialko 1991: 9).

So, owing to the investigations of Varvara Illynskaya and Elene Fialko, we know at present that the burial of young women with weapons is characteristic of all regions of Scythia, from the Danube to the Don River.

The Don (ancient Tanais) was the most eastern and remote part of the Scythian kingdom. And the Scythian kurgans of the fifth to fourth centuries BC stretch from the Middle and Lower Don, from Voronezh in the north to Rostov in the south (Fig. 1). Until recently Amazon burials were discovered only in the Lower Don area: the Elizavetovskiy group and some graveyards near the villages of Sladkovskiy and Kasheevka. At the Elizavetovskiy cemetery, there were seven female interments found with weapons of the fifth century BC and twenty-four with weapons of the fourth century BC (Kopylov 1992: 41).

In 1967 a very interesting Amazon burial of the fifth century BC was discovered at this group, in kurgan 30, burial 2. The skeleton of a woman approximately 40 years old was accompanied by a rich assemblage: an iron spearhead, an iron sword, bronze and iron arrowheads, two bronze bracelets, a necklace of glass and golden beads, a bronze mirror,

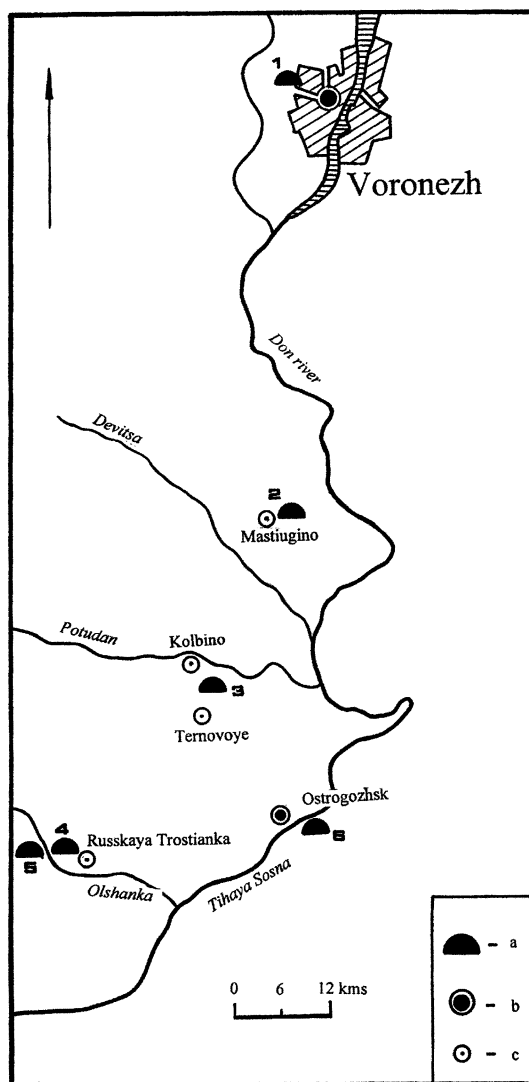


Figure 1 Map of the Middle Don region demonstrating all the known Scythian kurgan groups of the fifth to fourth centuries BC.

a clay spindle-whorl, one Greek amphora, a hand-made bowl, and sacrificial food for the journey to the underworld – a chunk of beef with an iron knife (Brashinsky 1973: 60–1).

In kurgan 4, near Sladkovsky village, a large square grave (5 × 5m) contained fewer than seven individuals – men, women, and children. Among them is the well-preserved interment of a woman warrior. She was laid on a massive chalk floor and accompanied by various arms: a long iron sword, a spear point, and bronze and iron arrowheads. Near the skull was placed a large Greek amphora, a part of a sheep's carcass, an iron knife, a bronze mirror, a gold necklace and earrings. The date of this burial is the fourth century BC (Maksimenko 1983: 31–2).

Thus, the Lower Don (Tanais), in accordance with the classical written tradition and numerous archaeological finds, corresponded wholly to its old name – 'The Land of Amazons'. At the Middle Don, however, in spite of intensive excavations at Scythian kurgans during the last 100 years, nothing was discovered similar to the Amazons from other parts of Scythia. Only recently, five graves of women warriors were uncovered, as a result of explorations conducted by the Potudan Archaeological Expedition, 1993–2001 (Institute of Archaeology, Moscow), on the large group of Scythian burial-mounds near the villages Ternovoye and Kolbino (90 kms to the south of Voronezh city) (Gulyaev 1995: 42). Below is a short description of them (in order of their discovery from year to year).

Kurgan 6 (height 1.2m; diameter 25m) had the foundations of a massive wooden platform built directly on the ancient land surface. Grave robbers had disturbed a skeleton (a young woman 20–25 years old) and taken the most precious objects deposited in the grave. But we found the heads of two iron darts and more than thirty bronze arrowheads of the usual Scythian type. This woman warrior also had a bronze mirror, two fine gold earrings, seven large gold beads and several glass necklace pendants. All of these objects can be dated to the end of the fifth to the first quarter of the fourth centuries BC.

Kurgan 5 (height 1m; diameter 45m) was surrounded by a special circular moat (Fig. 2). Under the earthen mound we uncovered a large grave (6 × 6m) in the centre with a long (7m), narrow (1m) corridor or 'dromos' from the south-east side. A complicated system of wooden wall panels and a flat roof were supported by twenty posts. This burial was comprehensively looted soon after the funeral ceremony. On the floor of the grave we could find only a part of a human skull with the lower jaw, several bronze and iron arrowheads, and about ten small gold stamped plaques. In the northern part of the moat a stone altar in the form of a large oval plate (80cms long) was uncovered. The corridor remained intact even after the robbers' attack. It contained the funeral food (pieces of horse with an iron knife), three jug-like Scythian pottery vessels, and two small ritual clay cups (Fig. 3). According to anthropological analysis, a young woman, 20–25 years old was buried here. The age of this barrow is the fourth century BC.

Kurgan 8 (height 0.3m; diameter 25m) is a small mound, badly damaged by ploughing over many years (Fig. 4). Under the embankment in the centre, there was a grave 4 × 4m. Its walls were lined with vertical posts. The wooden roof shelter was supported by nine poles. This burial was also plundered in antiquity, and on the grave's floor the remains of a young woman (about 20 years old) were preserved, with some accompanying objects: gold ornaments for a wooden cap (with the representation of a griffin), several small gold plaques, two broken clay vessels (one from the northern Caucasus, another a Greek painted jar), one iron arrowhead and the most impressive find – a bone comb with the

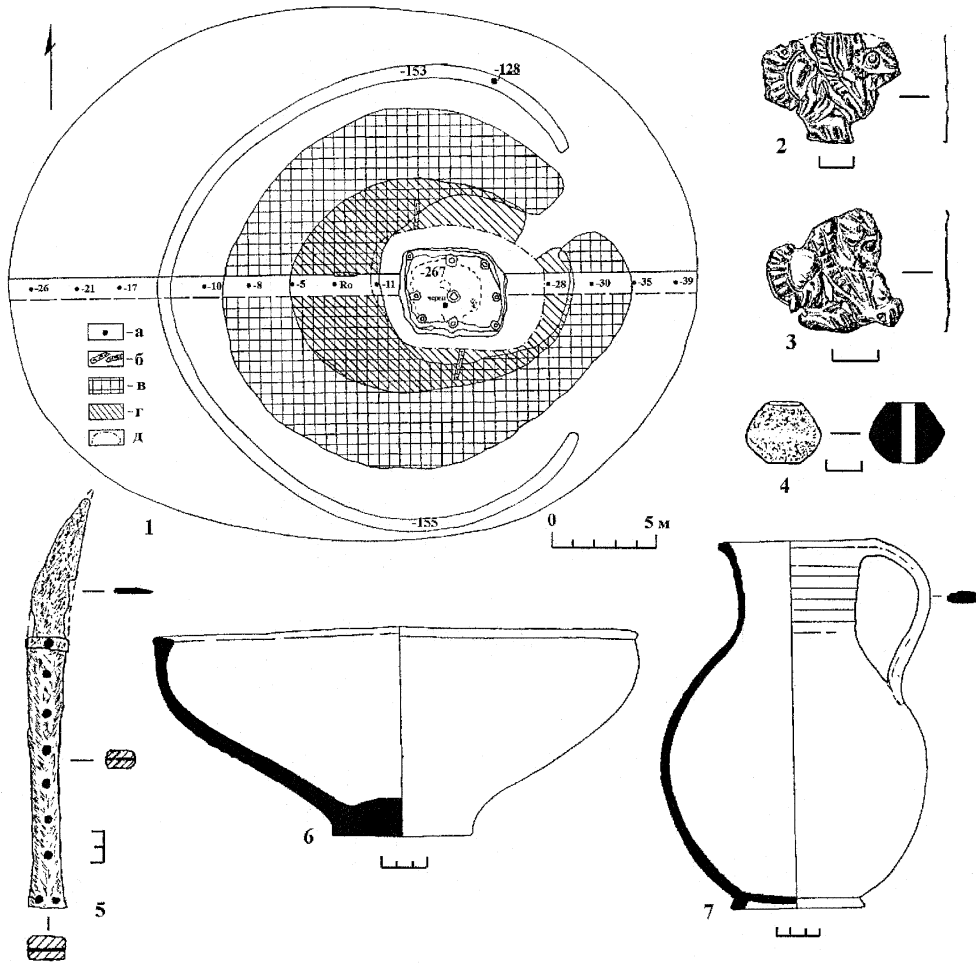


Figure 2 Burial mound 5, Ternovoye group. Plan of the mound and of the grave.

figure of a leopard, a fierce beast of the steppes and deserts (Fig. 5). This complex belongs to the fourth century BC.

Kurgan 10 (height 0.4m; diameter 28m) was encircled by a moat. The size of the grave was 4.3 × 3.2m. The walls and roof of the funeral chamber were built of wooden posts. Nine poles supported this construction. The burial (looted in antiquity) contained some remains of a woman (25 years old), two golden plaques with stamped representations of a winged eagle-headed griffin, a clay spindle-whorl, fragments of a pottery vessel, an iron knife, and one iron arrowhead.

Kurgan 12 (height 0.75 m; diameter 30m), also plundered in ancient times, had a grave pit in the centre (4 x 4m). On the bottom of the pit the disarticulated bones of a skeleton, belonging to a woman (30 years old), were preserved, and several objects – two small gold plaques, an iron arrowhead, and the upper part of a Greek bowl for drinking wine

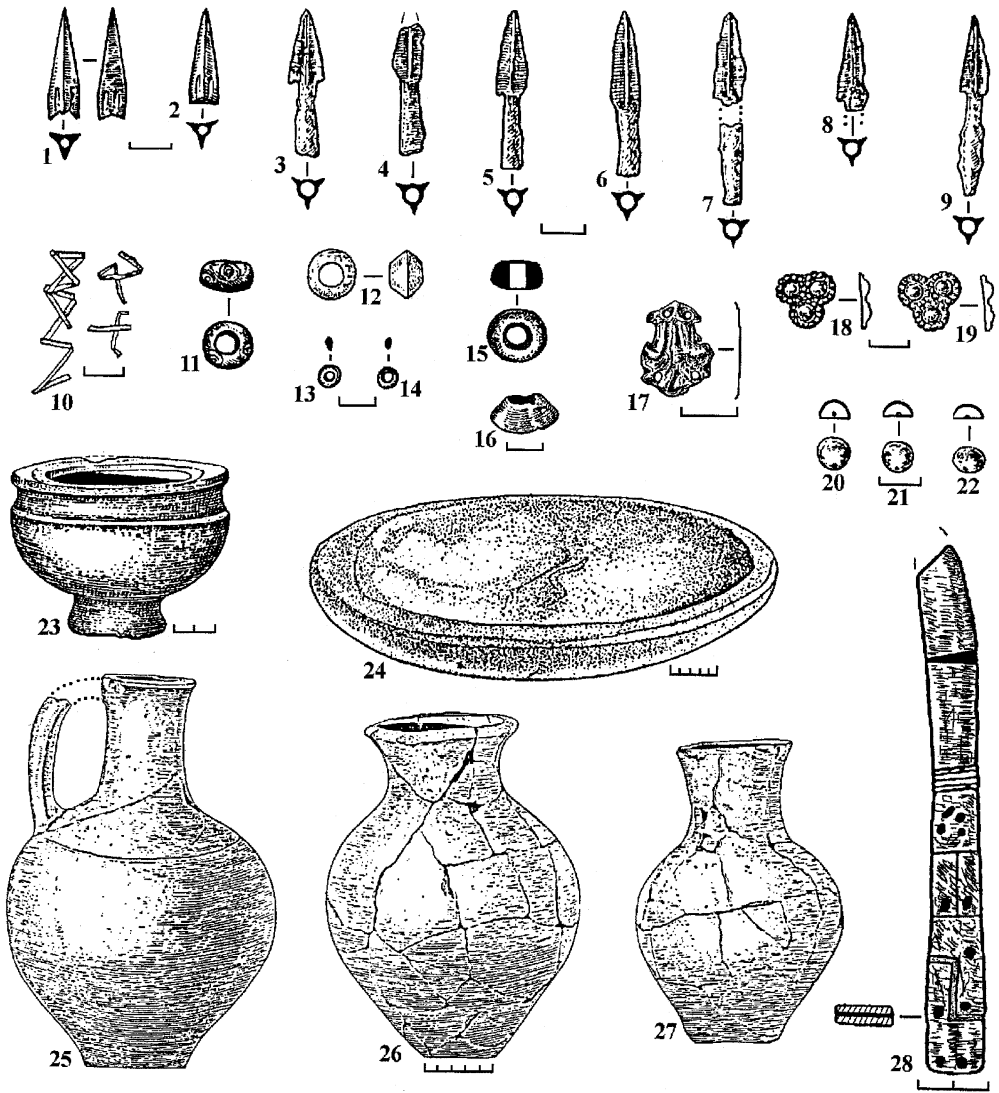


Figure 3 Assemblage of objects from the Amazon burial; kurgan 5, Ternovoye village: 1–2: bronze arrowheads; 3–9: iron arrowheads; 10: silver wire from the wooden cup; 11–14: glass beads; 15–16: bronze ornaments of horse harness; 17–22: gold plaques; 23: ritual clay bowl; 24: stone plate-altar; 25–7: jar-like Scythian pottery vessels; 28: iron knife.

(canfar). This burial can be dated to the fourth century BC (Gulyaev and Savchenko 1998: 119–29).

Thus, it is evident that female burials with weapons investigated by our expedition near the villages of Ternovoye and Kolbino in the Voronezh region, belonged, without any doubt, to young and noble Scythian women. Principal considerations are their ages at death (20–30 years old), the high social status of their burials (the size of tombs in the

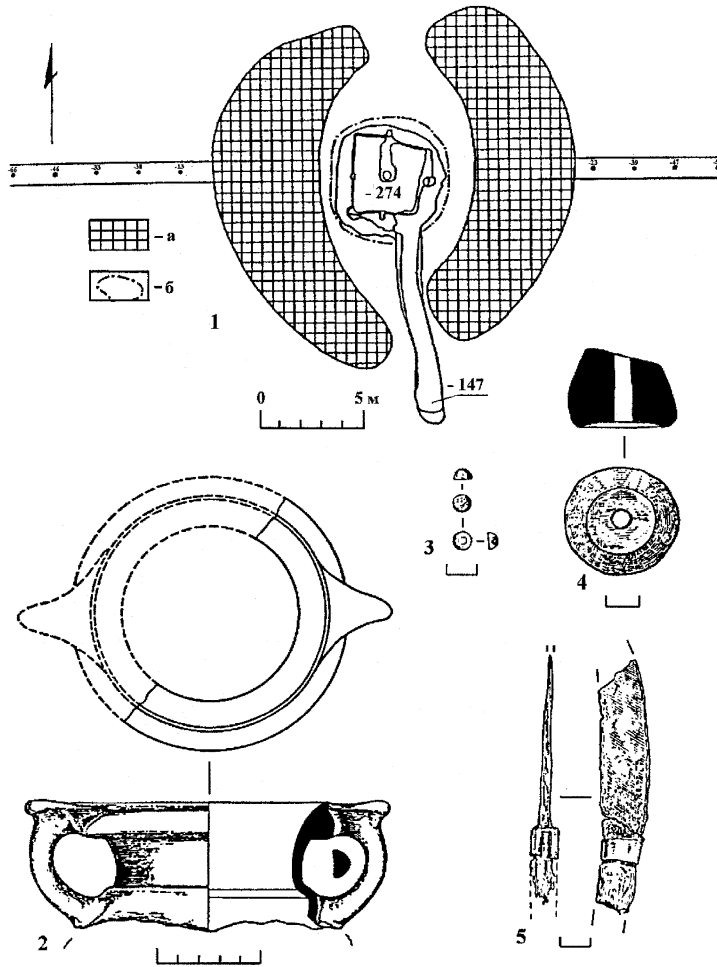


Figure 4 Burial mound 8, Ternovoye group. Plan of the mound and drawings of finds.

kurgans, elaborate funeral rituals, and the remains of the fabulous treasures, which were looted by ancient robbers). These women were, according to all indications, the true Amazons of the classical written tradition.

Consequently, the Middle Don area, in this sense, was similar to the rest of Scythia, where (as in the Sauromatian territory also) the graves of women-warriors appeared at the end of the sixth to fifth centuries BC. These young militant horsewomen from the Scythian kingdom do not necessarily correspond with the terrible 'killers of men' described by Herodotus for the Sauromatians. It is possible that there was an obligation on the women to serve as warriors.

My hypothesis is that some kind of military service existed for defined social and age groups of Scythian women and girls (as lightly armed horse detachments). They were guarding the hearth and the homestead, especially when the adult men left in raids and

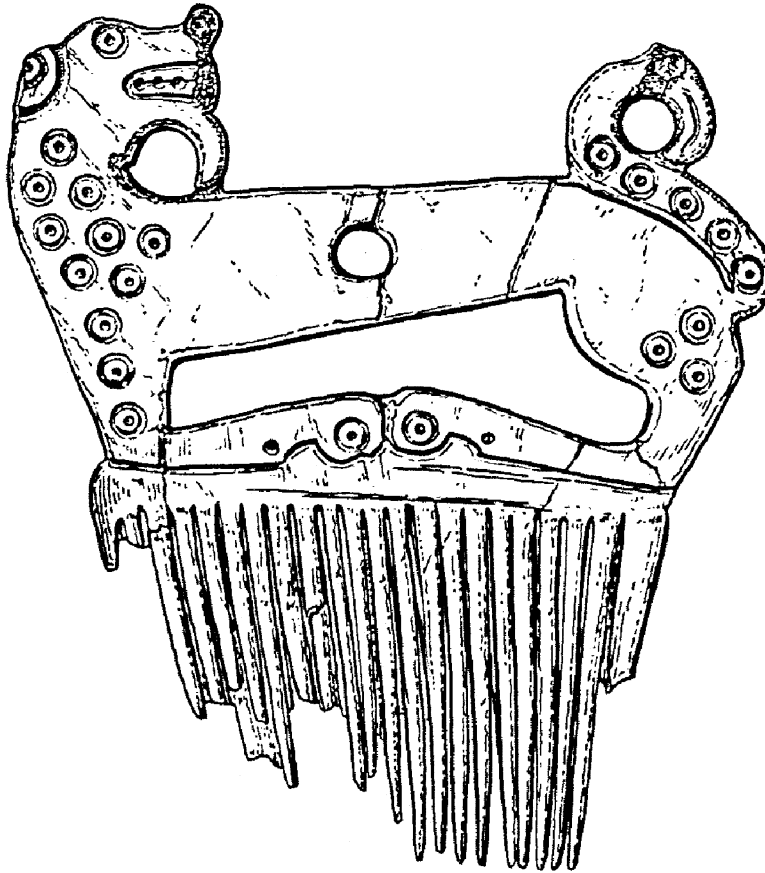


Figure 5 Bone comb with a figure of leopard (gepard). Kurgan 8, Ternovoje, fourth century BC.

military campaigns or went away for long seasonal migration with cattle herds. It is very probable that for successful fulfilment of these functions the Scythian women were specially instructed and trained from youth in military knowledge and the ability to handle a weapon with the necessary skill (Murzin and Fialko 1999: 181–2). Diodorus of Sicily recorded that the women among the Scythians, like the men, were trained for war and they are just as brave as males; therefore, many great feats were carried out by glorious females not only in the Scythia, but in neighbouring lands also (Diodorus of Sicily II: 44–6).

Finally, it is necessary to mention another aspect of the complex ‘Amazon’ phenomenon in the Scythian world. The well-known Russian historian Michael Rostovtzeff wrote in 1918 that the Amazons were connected with the ancient cult of the Mother Goddess, associated with social and political organization of the matriarchal type, where women were not only mothers and nurses, but warriors and chieftains also (Rostovtzeff 1918: 81). It has been suggested that the cult of the goddess of fertility (or the Mother Goddess), in

its various forms, was widely spread during the Scythian period in the northern Black Sea area, northern Caucasus, and in Asia Minor: Artemis of Efess, Aphrodite Apatura, Demeter, Cybele, and so on.

In the Scythian kurgan near Kherson city (Ukraine), a female burial of the fifth century BC was found, containing a bronze mirror with a handle formed as the figure of the goddess Cybele, together with a quiver with bronze arrowheads and an iron knife or dagger (Yatzenko 1959: 51). Golden earrings with an image of Cybele, sitting on a throne, formed by two lions, originated from Tolstaya Mogila (near Ordzhonikidze city, Ukraine) from the grave of a Scythian 'queen' (Mozolevsky 1979: 27). Absolutely identical gold ornaments with Cybele's figure were uncovered in kurgan 5 near Mastiugino village, Middle Don (Fig. 6) (Liberov 1965: plate 36, 27) and in a rich female burial near

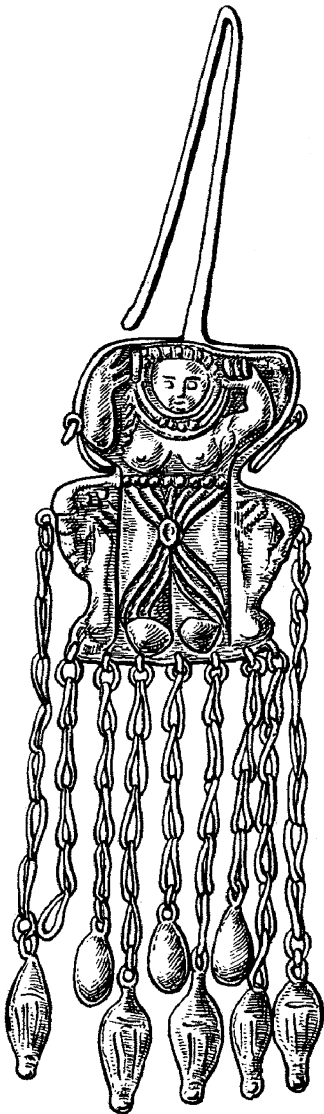
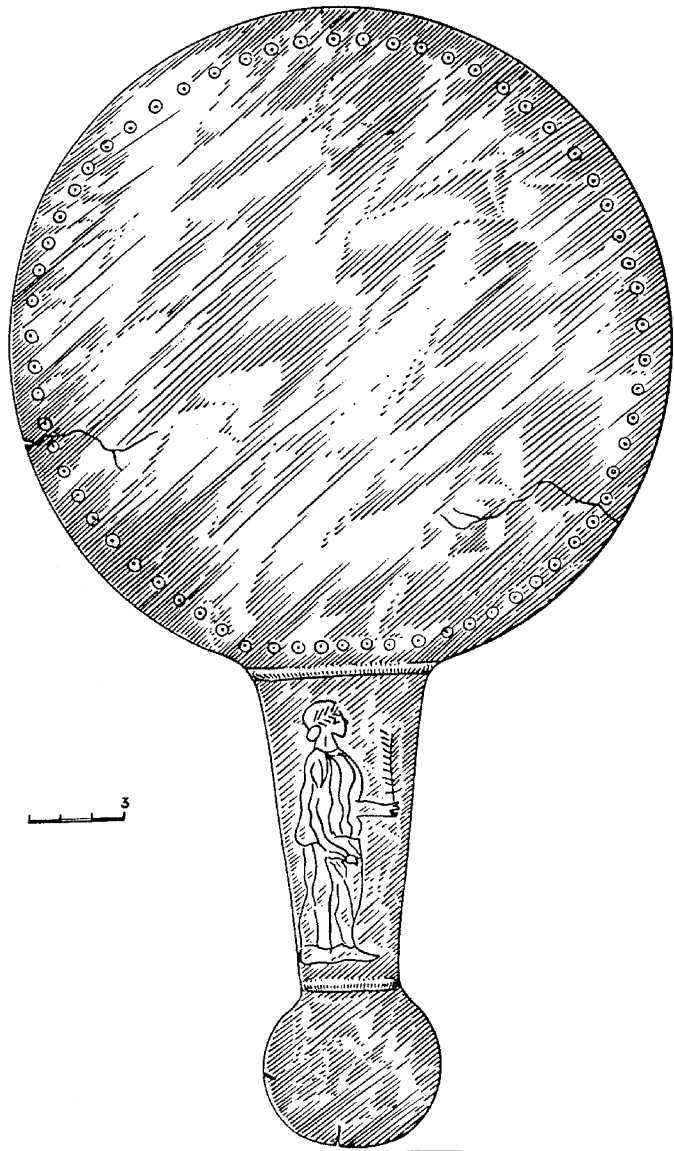


Figure 6 Gold earring with a figure of Cybele goddess, kurgan 5, near Mastiugino village, fourth century BC.

Figure 7 Bronze Greek mirror with a representation of a female figure, holding an olive bough in the left hand; plundered kurgan near Starozhivotinnoe village (20 kms to the north of Voronezh); fourth century BC.



Liubimovka village, Ukraine (Leskov 1972: 21). One badly plundered Scythian kurgan near Starozhivotinaya village (20kms to the north of Voronezh) contained a female grave with a Greek bronze mirror with a woman's figure holding an olive bough in one hand – the symbol of fertility (Fig. 7) (Puzikova 2001: 265).

Rostovtzeff's theory about the close connection of the Amazons with a cult of fertility, Mother Goddess, or Great Mother may have some justification. Archaeological explorations of the last decade in the territory of Scythia have shown convincingly that some Scythian females held a prestigious position in society. They seem to have played an important role in performing religious rituals for their clans and tribes and, in the case of necessity, fought with enemies as the mounted, lightly armed auxiliary troops.

It is possible that the myth of the Amazons was based in reality. Stories of armed, nomadic horsewomen could have been brought from the hinterlands of the Eurasian steppes to the Greeks, and were then transformed by Hellenic writers into the compelling legend of the beautiful and ruthless female warriors – the Amazons.

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