

### **TED-Ed Video Lesson:**

Since the time of Homer, ancient stories told of fierce warriors dwelling beyond the Mediterranean world, striking fear into the mightiest empires of antiquity. Their exploits were recounted by many epic poets.

They fought in the legendary Trojan War and their grand army invaded Athens. Jason and the Argonauts passed by their shores, barely avoiding their deadly arrows.

These formidable fighters faced off against the greatest champions of myth: Heracles, Theseus, and Achilles. And every single one of these warriors was a woman. The war-loving Amazons, “the equals of men” in courage and skill, were familiar to everyone in ancient Greece.

Amazon battle scenes decorated the Parthenon on the Athenian Acropolis; paintings and statues of Amazons adorned temples and public spaces.

Little girls played with Amazon dolls, and Amazons were a favorite subject on Greek vase paintings.

In Greek art and literature, they were depicted as daring and desirable, but also terrifying and deadly, and doomed to die at the hands of Greek heroes.

### **Were Amazons merely figures of myth, or something more?**

It was long assumed that they were imaginary, like the cyclops and centaurs. But curiously enough, stories from ancient Egypt, Persia, the Middle East, Central Asia, India, and China also featured Amazon-like warrior women.

And Amazons were described in ancient historical accounts, not just

myths. Writers like Herodotus, Plato, and Strabo never doubted their existence.

### **So who were the real women warriors known as Amazons?**

Ancient historians located the Amazon homeland in Scythia, the vast territory stretching from the Black Sea across the steppes of Central Asia. This immense region was populated by nomadic tribes whose lives centered on horses, archery, and warfare.

Their culture flourished for about 1,000 years beginning around 800 BC.

Feared by Greeks, Persians, and the Chinese, the Scythians left no written records. But we can find clues in how their neighbors described them, as well as in archaeology.

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Scythians' ancestors were the first to ride horses and they invented the recurve bow. And, because a female mounted archer could be as fast and as deadly as a male, all children were trained to ride and shoot. Women hunted and fought alongside men, using the same weapons.

The harsh landscape and their nomadic lifestyle created its own form of equality. This amazed the ancient Greeks, whose women led restricted indoor lives.

The earliest stories of the Scythians, and Amazons, may have been exaggerated rumors. But as the Greeks began to trade around the Black Sea and further east, their portrayals became more realistic. Early depictions of Amazons showed them with Greek weapons and armor.

But in later representations, they wielded bows and battle-axes, rode

horses, and wore pointed caps and patterned trousers characteristic of steppe nomads.

Until recently, no one was sure how strong the links were between Scythians and the Amazons of Greek myth. But recent archaeological discoveries have provided ample evidence.

More than 1,000 ancient Scythian kurgans, or burial mounds, have been excavated, containing skeletons and weapons. Archaeologists had previously assumed that weapons could only belong to male warriors.

But modern DNA analysis so far has revealed that about 300 skeletons buried with weapons belong to females ranging in age from 10 to 45, and more are being found every year.

The women's skeletons show battle injuries: ribs slashed by swords, skulls bashed by battle-axes, and arrows embedded in bones.

In classical art and writings, the fearsome Amazons were always portrayed as brave and heroic. In male-dominated classical Greece, however, the very idea of strong women who gloried in freedom and war aroused mixed feelings.

And yet, the Greeks were also drawn to egalitarian ideals.

Is it possible that the mythic realm of thrilling Amazon tales was a way to imagine women and men as equal companions?

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