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AMAZONS II. AMAZONS IN THE IRANIAN WORLD
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The Amazons of ancient Greek mythology were depicted in art and literature as fierce, barbarian women of exotic lands east of the Mediterranean (Mayor; David, pp. 203-25, 227-31). In myth, Amazons were the archenemies of ancient Greek heroes such as Heracles and Achilles; but Greek and Roman historians also described historical, legendary, and contemporary warrior women of Eurasia whose lives and exploits were like those of Amazons. Thanks to more than 300 archeological discoveries of battle-scarred female remains buried with weapons in graves from the Black Sea to the Altai region, we now know that the Amazons of myth and legend were influenced by women of nomadic Saka-Scythian and related cultures of Eurasia (Mayor, pp. 63-83).

In 2004, the Iranian archeologist, Alireza Hejebri Nobari, who had excavated 109 graves of warriors with weapons in an ancient site near the city of Tabriz in northwest Iran, pointed out in an interview that one of the graves held the bones of a warrior woman. This attribution was based on the DNA tests of the skeleton indicating that the skeleton inside the tomb was of a woman warrior and not, as previously suggested, that of a man because of the metal sword buried close by it (Hejebri Nobari, quoted in *Hambastegi News*, 2004). Plans were made to conduct DNA tests on the skeletons of other ancient warriors in the same site, but no further reports have appeared (Reuters).

The lives of Saka-Scythian and other related nomadic people centered on

horses and archery, and the women participated in hunting and warfare alongside the men (FIGURE 1). Many Scythian groups from the Black Sea, the Caucasus, and the Caspian regions spoke forms of Old Iranian languages. More than 200 names of Amazons and women warriors have survived from antiquity, preserved in texts, inscriptions, and traditional epics. Most of the names are Greek, but other languages are represented, including Egyptian, Caucasian, Turkic, and Iranian. The etymology of the non-Greek word "Amazon" is unknown but may have had multiple sources. Several theories have been suggested, ranging from the Circassian (ČARKAS) name *a-mez-a-ne* "forest [or moon] mother" to ancient Iranian *ha-mazon* "warrior" (Mayor, pp. 85-88; 234-46; AMAZONS i).

It is often assumed that the ancient Greeks held a monopoly on Amazons. But Greeks were not the only ancient culture to tell stories about warlike women and thrill to accounts of legendary and historical female warriors. The ancient Medes and Persians fought Scythians from the north and Saka tribes on the eastern frontiers of their empires. Beyond the Greek-influenced world, one can find intrepid horsewomen-archers in oral traditions, art, and literature of Egypt, Arabia, Persia, the Caucasus, Armenia, Azarbaijan, Central Asia, and India. The exploits of these warrior women recall the Amazons of Greco-Roman myth and history (see Kruk, pp. 16-21, on echoes of Amazons in tales of Near Eastern warrior women).

Amazon-like legends arose about the Assyrian warrior queen Semiramis (Akkadian *sa-mu-ra-mat*; Iranian *Šamiram*), widow of the king Ninos (on whom, see also CTESIAS), who ruled around 810-805 BCE. A colorful frieze of glazed brick in Babylon described by Ctesias (the Greek writer and physician in the Achaemenid court of Artaxerxes II, ca. 413-397 BCE) showed Semiramis, in about 470 BCE, on horseback spearing a leopard. It was said that Semiramis rode her swift horse to conquer Bactria, personally leading a band of mountaineers to scale a high cliff to attack a citadel. In her campaigns, she survived arrow and javelin wounds. Like Amazons of Greek myth, Semiramis rejected marriage but enjoyed sexual partners of her own choosing. Disguised as a boy on the battlefield, she only revealed her sex after victories. To blur differences between men and women and provide protection while riding, Semiramis designed a new style of practical clothing for herself and her subjects (Diodorus, 2.4-20). The long-sleeved tunics and trousers were so comfortable and attractive that the Medes and Persians adopted the costume (CLOTHING ii. In the Median and Achaemenid Periods; Gera, pp. 65-83; Justin,

1.12). Notably, the sorceress Medea of Greek myth, from ancient Colchis, was also credited with inventing the clothing worn by Saka-Scythians and Persians (and Amazons in Greek vase paintings). According to Strabo (11.13.7-10), to hide her sex, Medea donned trousers and a tunic and covered her face when she and Jason of the Argonauts ruled jointly over what is now Azarbaijan and Armenia.

Another legendary warrior queen was said to be the first to invent trousers. According to a lost history by Hellanikos (5th century BCE), Atossa, whose ethnic origin is not clear, was raised as a boy by her father King Ariaspes (the names are Persian but their origins and dates are shrouded in mystery). After she inherited her father's kingdom, this Atossa "ruled over many tribes and was most warlike and brave in all deeds" (Jacoby, frag. in Gera, p. 8). She created a new style of dress to be worn by men and women alike, long sleeves and trousers that blurred gender differences (Gera, pp. 8, 141-58). Amazons in ancient Greek art are depicted wearing trousers. In fact, trousers were the invention of the first people to domesticate and ride horses on the steppes (Mayor, pp. 191-208).

From fragments of Ctesias's *Persica* we learn of Persian accounts of two Saka warrior queens, Zarinaia and Sparethra. Diodorus based his biography of Zarinaia on Ctesias's fuller account; a papyrus fragment of the historian Nicolas of Damascus also relates her story (Ctesias, frags. 5, 7, 8a and c; P. Oxy. 2330). According to Diodorus (2.34), the powerful Saka "whose women were known to fight like Amazons" were "ruled by a woman named Zarinaia, who was devoted to warfare." A daring, beautiful warrior queen who subdued many enemy tribes, Zarinaia was honored after her death with a colossal gold statue and a monumental pyramid tomb, 600 feet high.

When the Parthians (Irano-Scythians) rebelled against the Median Empire, they allied with Zarinaia, who had assumed leadership of her Saka tribe after the death of her husband. She married the Parthian ruler Marmárēs/Mérmeros and the Parthians "entrusted their country and city" to Zarinaia in the long wars against the Medes (Diodorus, 2.34). During one of the battles, Zarinaia fought the Median commander Stryangaeus. The Mede wounded Zarinaia, but struck by her valor, he spared her life. When Mérmeros later captured Stryangaeus, Zarinaia defied her husband and freed Stryangaeus and other Median prisoners of war. With their help, she killed Mérmeros. After peace was declared between the Medes and the Saka-Parthian alliance, Stryangaeus came to visit his friend Zarinaia in Rhoxanake

("Shining City," thought to be in the Roshan area of the western Pamirs) and declared his love (Gera, pp. 6, 84-100; Mayor, pp. 379-81). Scholars have compared this Persian love story to the tragic Greek myth of Achilles, who regretted killing the valiant Amazon Penthesilea at Troy and expressed his love for her dead body. But the Persian tale offers a very different scenario. Zarinaia and Stryangaeus had spared each other's lives in battle, and thus friendship and love were feasible.

It has been suggested that the existence of Persian narratives about "fighting a Scythian queen" may have formed part of a conventional Iranian repertory of heroic feats, just as fighting against Amazons seems to have been a required task for many Greek heroes" (Sancisi-Weerdenburg, p. 32). But some accounts reflect historical events and figures, such as Cyrus the Great.

After his conquest of the Median Empire in 550 BCE, Cyrus II of Persia made war on the Saka tribes between the Caspian Sea and Bactria. In about 545 BCE, Cyrus battled the Amyrgioi of Sogdiana and Bactria, known to the Persians as "*haoma*-drinking Saka." When Cyrus captured their chieftain Amorges ("Excellent Meadows"), Amorges' wife Sparethra ("Heroic Army") became the leader of the tribe. According to Ctesias, Sparethra called up an immense force to attack Cyrus, made up of "300,000 horsemen and 200,000 horsewomen" (Photius, 72: epitome of Ctesias, *Persica*). The numbers may be exaggerated, but the detail provides strong evidence that women and men rode to war side by side in Saka-Scythian tribes (Mayor, pp. 282-83). It also supports the comments of Diodorus (2.34.3) regarding the Saka: "These people, in general, have courageous women who share with their men the dangers of war." Sparethra led her vast army of allied tribes against Cyrus, defeating his troops and capturing many of Cyrus's highest-ranking men, including three sons or cousins. Sparethra negotiated a treaty with Cyrus, who released her husband Amorges in exchange for the Persians taken prisoner. Sparethra's tribe became an ally of Cyrus (Diodorus, 2.34).

Cyrus was not so lucky with Queen Tomyris ("Iron," Mongolic/Turkic *temur* with Iranian suffix? or *Tahm-rayis* "Brave Glory"?). In about 530 BCE, Cyrus was routed by Tomyris's horde of mounted archers, the Massagetae, a confederation of Saka-Scythians east of the Caspian. The Massagetae were warlike archers on horseback noted for the gender equality and the sexual freedom of their women. After this defeat, Cyrus resorted to treachery, setting up an ambush using wine as the bait. The *kumis*-drinking nomads, unused to wine, were slaughtered and Tomyris's son captured. Enraged by the trick,

Tomyris sent a message to Cyrus vowing to "give him his fill of blood" (Herodotus, 1.214). In the next battle, amid horrific mayhem, Tomyris's army decimated the Persians. Cyrus was mortally wounded. It was said that Tomyris found the king's corpse, hacked off his head, and plunged it into a wine jug brimming with blood (Diodorus, 2.44; Herodotus, 1.211-14; Justin, 1.8; Strabo, 11.8.5-9; there are various versions of Cyrus's death). Today Kazakhstan claims Tomyris as its national heroine and issues coins in her honor, and some have suggested that the magnificent "Golden Warrior" of Issyk could be the remains of Tomyris (Mayor, pp. 76, 143-44, 187, n. 2, fig. 24.3).

Herodotus (7.99; 8.68-69, 87-101-3, 132, and 185), a native of Caria, described a seafaring female commander from his Persian homeland in the 5th century BCE. She was Xerxes' trusted advisor and naval commander, Artemisia I of Halicarnassus in Caria. Artemisia saw action in Euboea and then bravely commanded a Persian warship in the Battle of Salamis, 480 BCE. A costly alabaster perfume jar, a gift from Xerxes to Artemisia, was discovered in the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus (tomb of Mausolus and Artemisia II); the jar is inscribed in Egyptian hieroglyphics, Elamite, and Babylonian cuneiform (Mayor, pp. 314-15).

Another historical female military leader was Tirgatao, leader of the Ixomatae, a Maeotian tribe of the Azov-Don-Caucasus region northeast of the Black Sea, in about 430-390 BCE. Tirgatao (Iranian *tir* arrow, *tighra tava*, "Arrow Power") won many victories with her army of male infantry archers and cavalrywomen skilled with bows and lariats. She married Hecataeus, king of the Sindi, a people of the Taman Peninsula and adjacent Black Sea coast. At one point Tirgatao was imprisoned in a tower in Sinda by order of Satyrus, king of the Bosphorus. Tirgatao made a daring escape and returned to her tribe on the Don River. She raised another army and took revenge, crushing Satyrus and laying waste to his lands (Mayor, pp. 370-71; Polyaenus 8.55; Strabo 11.2.11).

An episode in the memoir of the Greek general and historian Xenophon suggests that a group of captive Persian women helped defend his army (*Anabasis* 4.3.18-19, 6.1.11-13). Xenophon recounts how his large mercenary Greek army marched from Persia north through Anatolia to the Black Sea and back to Greece, in about 400 BCE. On their route through Persia, the soldiers seized women from local villages to serve as concubines and servants. On the long trek through dangerous territories and rugged terrain, the soldiers and the captive women shared hardships and came to trust and depend on each

other for survival. They learned each other's languages and formed bonds of friendship, and the women helped to fend off attacks from hostile tribes. Xenophon does not say that the women had been trained to use weapons, but at a banquet hosted by Paphlagonian chieftains, at least one of the Persian women performed a war dance with weapons. Greek soldiers boasted to their hosts that "these very women drove off the king of Persia!" (Xenophon, 6.1.13; Mayor, pp. 140-41).

Alexander the Great was involved with several women identified as Amazons, as described in his biographies and in the body of legends that arose after his conquest of the Persian Empire and his death in 323 BCE. The most celebrated story, reported by several ancient biographers, recounts his meeting with the queen of the Amazons, Thalestris, who stalked the young conqueror from her home between the Black Sea and the Caspian, catching up with Alexander in his camp in Hyrcania. Alexander agreed with her request for intercourse so that she could bear his child. Another encounter with warrior women occurred upon Alexander's meeting with Atropates, satrap of Media, who presented him with a cavalry unit of horsewomen, identified as "Amazons" by the historians Arrian (7.13.1-6) and Curtius (10.4.3; Mayor, pp. 318-38). Amazons also appear in the legends known collectively as the *Alexander Romance* (Greek, Armenian, and other versions dating from the 3rd century BCE to the 6th century CE). In the Persian epic poem *Šāh-nāma* by Ferdowsi (b. 940 CE), Eskandar (Alexander) meets the warrior queen Qaydāfa of Andalusia (Spain). In a later version of this meeting by epic poet Neẓāmi Ganjavi (1141-1209 CE), Eskandar disguised as an envoy visits the court of Nušāba, the queen of Sakasena in Barda (Barḏaʿa). In both versions, Qaydāfa and Nušāba recognize Eskandar from his portrait, which they had secretly commissioned earlier. The queens do not engage in battle but discuss philosophy with Eskandar as equals. Near the end of his life, it was said that Eskandar corresponded with the Amazons of Harum and they met in battle outside the city of women (FIGURE 2). In other Islamic traditions, Eskandar meets with Amazon queens named Baryanus and Radiya (Kruk, p. 17).

According to the military historian Polyaenus (8.56), a warrior woman named Amage (derived from Iranian *magu* "mage"?) was acclaimed as ruler of the Roxolani, a tribe of Alan-Sarmatians in 165-140 BCE. She also won many victories. In one incident, Amage led 120 of her best warriors in an attack and personally killed the enemy commander. She saved his son, however, and persuaded him to rule peacefully (Mayor, pp. 371-72).

In 138 BCE, the Parthian queen Rhodogyne (Gk. “Woman in Red”) married the Seleucid king Demetrius II Nicator. Apparently she did not accompany him from exile in Hyrcania to Antioch in 131 BCE. According to ancient traditions, she was “resplendent in scarlet belted tunic and trousers woven with charming designs” (*Tractatus De Mulieribus* 8, in Gera, p. 8), riding her black Nisaean mare to defeat the Armenians (Gera, pp. 141-58; Philostratus, *Imagines* 2.5). Rhodogyne was famous for rushing off to battle without braiding her hair. Her image appeared on Persian royal seals with long flowing hair, and she was honored with a golden statue showing her hair half braided (Polyaenus, 8.27; *Tractatus De Mulieribus*).

In about 66 BCE, during the Third Mithradatic War, Pompey’s Roman army pursued King Mithradates VI after a crushing defeat in Pontus to the southern foothills of the Caucasus in ancient Colchis. In Caucasian Albania and Iberia, Pompey’s soldiers fought battles against an aggressive coalition of tribes, numbering about 60,000, allied with Mithradates. Plutarch (*Pompey* 35 and 45) and Appian (*Mithradatic Wars* 12.15-17) reported that “Amazons” fought alongside the male warriors. Pompey’s soldiers discovered warrior women among the dead with wounds showing they had fought courageously. Pompey even captured some of these women alive. In his magnificent triumph of 61 BCE, Pompey paraded his most illustrious prisoners of war, including a group of Amazons from the southern Caucasus, labeled “queens of the Scythians.” Notably, the Greek-Persian king Mithradates had fallen in love with Hypsicratea, a horsewoman archer of an unknown Scythian tribe of the Caucasus region. She had joined his cavalry in about 69 BCE. He praised her courage and battle skills, and she became his last queen, as confirmed by the discovery of a statue base inscribed with her name near ancient Phanagoria, Taman Peninsula (Mayor, pp. 340-45, 349-53).

Roman sources reported that horsewomen served in the Persian cavalry of the Sasanian king Shapur I (240-270 CE; Harrel, p. 69; Zonaras 12.23.595). In later times, European travelers in Persia and Mughal India told of female battalions guarding royal harems. Like Amazons and Scythian women, women in Persian harems were described in art and literature riding horses, hunting with bows (and later with rifles), and playing polo (Walther, pp. 95-97).

Legends arose about female fighters of the Persian military nobility who served as Sasanian *savāran*/*aswārān*, cavalrymen and “knights” specializing in single combat on horseback or elephant. The anonymous short epic *Bānu Gošasb-nāma* (see Gošasb Bānu; variously dated 5th to 12th centuries CE) and

other poems featured the *savār* heroine Bānu Gošasb, Rostam's daughter; she battles several suitors and her own father and her husband Gēv. Princess Datma was described as an accomplished martial horsewoman-cavalier in *One Thousand and One Nights* (*Alf Layla Wa Layla*, 597th night; Burton, tr., V, pp. 94-98).

In the Islamic period, legendary guerrilla heroine-archer, Bānu Ḵorramdin (Ḵorrami), fought beside her husband Bābak Ḵorrami for two decades (816-837 CE) from their stronghold in Azarbaijan to overthrow the Arab Caliphate. Never defeated, ultimately they were overcome by treachery (Nafisi, p. 57).

As noted, warrior women appear in the *Šāh-nāma*, where the warlike Saka-Scythia nomads of Central Asia were known as Turanians. Ferdowsi's poems were drawn from pre-Islamic traditions (Walther, pp. 176-78). In the first (mythic-legendary) half of the *Šāh-nāma* women are presented very differently from the ways they are presented in the "historical" (post-Alexander) half of the poem. Dick Davis (2007, 2013) points out that the geography and names of the *Šāh-nāma* centered on "Turan," Parthia, a land with strong traditions of powerful Amazon-like women. Gordia ("Woman Warrior") was one foreign female fighter in the first half of the epic, but the most famous was champion horsewoman-archer Gordāfarid ("Created as a Hero"), daughter of Gaždaham. She defends their White Fortress (Dež-e Safīd) from invasion by the hero Sohrāb, son of Rostam and Tahmina, princess of Samangām (Bactria). In full armor, Gordāfarid challenges Sohrāb to single combat (FIGURE 3). Her long hair hidden under her helmet, Gordāfarid lets fly a hail of arrows as her swift horse weaves back and forth. Sohrāb's sword blow is deflected by her armored belt and she hacks his sword in two. Only when his lance knocks off her helmet does he realize that he is dueling a woman. He captures Gordāfarid with his lasso, but she tricks him into releasing her and she escapes with her people (FIGURE 4).

See also: Amestris (no. 4); Ḵosrow and Širin.

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