

Throughout the Greco-Roman world there are numerous tales of women warriors. Some are mythological, like the Amazons, while others are historical individuals, such as the warrior queens Boudica of the Iceni, and Zenobia of Palmyra. Yet, there are very few examples of “women warriors” who fought as equals to their men. Among these are the women of the Sauramatae tribe of the Scythians.

From the 7th to the 3rd centuries BC, the Scythian tribes were the masters of the southern steppes of Russia and the Caucasus. These nomadic, Indo-European people were the world’s first great horse-archer army. Their constant migrations, territorial expansion, and warlike nature brought them into conflict with the Assyrians, Babylonians, Egyptians, Medes, Persians, Greeks, Macedonians and the Greek Successor states. Indeed, the Bible refers to the Scythians as:

The ancient, mighty people whose language is hard to understand. They are always courageous, and their quivers are like an open grave. They will eat your harvest and bread, they will eat your sons and daughters, they will eat your sheep and oxen, they will eat your grapes and figs.

To their neighbours, the Scythians would have seemed like a plague of locusts, swooping in on horseback, looting anything that could be easily carried away, burning the rest, and quickly retreating back to the steppes in a cloud of dust. Their successes were so great, and their raids were so frequent, that Herodotus states “the Scythians ravaged the whole of Asia. They not only took tribute from each people, but also made raids and pillaged everything these people had.” He may have been overstating the case a bit, but there is no doubt that the Scythian’s reputation as ferocious warriors were well deserved.

The Scythians were never one united people, but a collection of related, independent tribes. Indeed, many ancient authors were grateful that the Scythian people never allied, since it was felt that a united Scythian nation would quickly overrun the world. Among tribes there were regional differences. For example those tribes in southern “Scythia”, that bordered

the Greek colonies on the Black Sea, were influenced by Greek weapons and artisans. However, one of the most unique of the Scythian tribes was the Sauramatae, and their women warriors.

The Sauramatae were considered, culturally, a “fringe” Scythian tribe, much like how the Greeks considered the Macedonians “poor cousins” culturally. What set them apart from the other Scythian tribes was the extent to which their women were considered equals in all things military. In Book IV of *The Persian Wars*, Herodotus explains that the origin of this custom was the marriage between a group of shipwrecked Amazons and the Scythian youths that discovered them in their territory. The Amazons agreed to marry the Scythians on the condition that they did not have to give up their martial ways in exchange for “women’s work”. According to Herodotus:

The women of the Sauramatae have continued from that day to the present, to observe their ancient customs, frequently hunting on horseback, with their husbands, sometimes even unaccompanied; in war taking the field; and wearing the same dress as the men.

All of this is supported by various historical accounts and by recent archeological grave finds. Traditionally, almost the entire adult population of a Scythian tribe, including a large number of women, would go to war in a major campaign. Herodotus states that during the campaign of Darius I in Scythia in 512 BC, the Persian forces were worn down by the hit-and-run horse-archer tactics of various Scythian tribes, including the Sauramatae and their women warriors, “who fought as equals” to the men. The fact that the women all fought as mounted horse-archers attests to their high status and skill.

We know that the Scythians buried their dead with everything that was important to them in life, and that they would need in the afterlife. A number of women’s burial mounds near Ordzhonikidze in the Caucasus support the case for Scythian warrior women. All of these graves contained a recurved “Scythian bow”, shaped like the Greek letter *sigma*, and a third contained arrows. Many also contained a *gorytos*, a combination bowcase and quiver that held up to 75 arrows. In some cases, these also had a small sheath for a knife built onto them as well. All of the bowcases were decorated with thin sheets of silver or gold inlay. Most graves contained

spears, javelins, and knives. A few contained daggers. Perhaps the only indication of their femininity was a particular type of round mirror, hung from their belts, and common in all female graves.

Both historians and burial mounds can give us some idea of their appearance as well. In Book VII of *The Persian Wars*, Herodotus describes the Scythians that were mustered in the great army of Xerxes:

The Scyths were clad in trousers, and had on their heads tall stiff caps rising to a point. They bore the bow of their country and the dagger: besides which they carried the battle-axe, or sagaris.

The burial mounds near Ordzhonikidze indicate that women often wore a type of pointed "tiara" headpiece, a collarless tunic with a long, attached skirt, male trousers, and either short or knee-length boots. Their clothing was ornately decorated with geometric and floral designs. The most common colours for these designs were red, blue, white and yellow. All Scythians wore a great deal of silver and gold jewelry, and their weapons would have been inlaid with silver and gold as well. Scythian women traditionally had long, dark, braided hair, usually worn in two or more "pig-tails".

As if the sight of these warrior women was not enough to induce terror into their foes, the Sauramatae had one more interesting custom to keep their neighbours at bay. Herodotus writes:

Their marriage-law lays it down, that no girl shall wed till she has killed a man in battle. Sometimes it happens that a woman dies unmarried at an advanced age, having never been able in her whole lifetime to fulfil the condition.

Is it any wonder that the Sauramatae went on numerous raids each spring as a new group of maidens "came of age". Interestingly enough, we have no record of any Sauramatae man divorcing his wife. Would you?