

Greek myth makes frequent reference to the Amazons, a race of female warriors who lived in Asia Minor and participated in the Trojan War and the exploits of such heroes as Hercules and Theseus. However, there were other and less familiar races of "tough" women whom the Greeks did not encounter until long after the Amazon legend was established. These were the women of the Celtic and para-Celtic peoples that lived in Europe west and north of Italy. Stories of these women are preserved, not in classical myth, but in the accounts of ancient historians and geographers.

Arrian of Nicomedia, a historian of the second century AD, informs us that the Amazons reckoned their genealogy by the maternal line. This procedure, in contrast to the Greek patrilineal system (in which girls might be called, for instance, "Eutyche daughter of Lysimachos"), was natural enough in a society where men were excluded and male children were expelled or enslaved. However, Greek writers also mention other female-dominated societies. For instance, the Liburnians of northern Dalmatia were said to be ruled by women (a form of government known as gynaeocracy), and the names on their stone inscriptions show traces of matrilineal family organization. Among the Cantabrians of northern Spain, the geographer Strabo records that daughters rather than sons are named as heirs, sisters marry off their brothers, and men hand dowries over to their wives instead of vice-versa. The original Amazons regenerated themselves by having sex with the men of adjacent tribes. Strabo tells of a similar custom in Gaul, on an island at the mouth of the river Loire. This island was inhabited by women, and no male ever set foot on it; but the women periodically visited the mainland to have sex with men.

Barbarian women were renowned for their toughness. Strabo informs us that Celtic women, at the time of childbirth, put their husbands to bed instead of lying down themselves; this practice is still found in parts of Portugal (see the delightful account by Leonard Wibberley, *No Garlic in the Soup!* [New York 1959] pp. 69, 147-8). These women even gave birth while working in the fields, and laying the child aside, returned immediately to their task. In wartime, Cantabrian women are said to have killed their own children to prevent them being captured. The military writer Polyaeus records that the opinion of Celtic women was always sought in decisions concerning war and peace, because on one occasion a group of women rushed onto the field and stopped a battle between two Celtic armies (shades of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata!*). On another occasion, the women of

Gergovia attempted to dissuade Julius Caesar's soldiers from devastating their town, by appearing on the battlements and baring their breasts.

Celtic women were particularly warlike, accompanying their husbands to battle and sometimes participating in the fighting. Ammianus Marcellinus claims that a whole band of opponents cannot beat one Gaul in a fight if he calls in his wife; for she is generally stronger than he, and with powerful limbs she delivers punches and kicks, like the shots of a catapult. Another historian, Appian, says of the Bracarans of north-west Spain that the women carry weapons alongside the men, and if captured commit suicide rather than endure slavery. Among the neighbouring Artabrians, the women make war while the men stay at home and look after the domestic chores (an early example of "house husbands"). In Britain, a revolt led by Boudicca, widow of the king of East Anglia, nearly succeeded in driving the Romans out of the province.

All of these peoples eventually came under the influence of Roman culture, and women adopted a less radical lifestyle. But "Amazonian" customs persisted beyond the imperial borders. Among the Picts of Scotland, matrilineal succession remained in force until the ninth century, the rulers being chosen by their ties to the female line. In Irish legend we meet Skatha, a mighty woman warrior who taught the great hero Cuchulainn; and Aifa, said to be the fiercest and strongest female warrior in the world. In Connacht, though Ailell was king, Queen Maev was the real ruler, ordering everything as she wished; she is said to have been as strong as a war goddess, and recognized no law except her own will. Even after Ireland was Christianized, the fighting spirit was kept alive by a woman, St. Gobnet (the patron saint of beekeeping), who ingeniously used bees to repel enemy raiders.

How much the ancient testimony is based on at least a kernel of fact, and how much is wild fantasy, is often difficult to judge. Clearly the Greeks and Romans were ready enough to believe that barbarian women were capable of a wide range of outrageous, "unfeminine" behaviour. But whereas the Amazons of Asia were probably fictitious, there is some evidence to suggest that gynaeocratic or matrilineal institutions actually existed in the west. As to the likelihood of women engaging in battle, I can only add that the Amazon River in Brazil received its name when a boatload of Portuguese explorers was attacked by a tribe of female warriors....