

# INTRODUCTION

## THE AMAZON "MYTH"

From the time of Homer (circa 700 B.C.) through to the time of the Roman empire, stories of a nation of women warriors known as the Amazons were commonplace. The ancient Greeks accepted these stories as historical fact, commemorating in sculpture on many of their public buildings the battles their Achaean ancestors fought with the Amazons. But by the time of Classical Greece, it was generally accepted that the Amazon nation that had attacked Achaea (ancient Greece) had long since disappeared. According to the Greeks, it had been decimated in the conflict with the Achaeans around the time of the Trojan War (circa 1200 B.C.)

Over the centuries, there has been a continuing fascination, both in literature and in art, with the Amazons. At the same time, their story was relegated to the realm of "myth." Critics of the ancient poets and historians point out that the literature of the period also contains references to such implausible creatures as the bull-headed minotaur, the half-human, half-horse centaurs, and other fantastic beings that were clearly no more than myths. Clearly, they say, the stories of a race of women warriors living separately from men must also be nothing more than a myth.

Plausible explanations can be found for both the minotaur and the centaur. The minotaur encountered by the Achaean prince Theseus is thought to be a distorted memory of the bulls that the Minoan acrobats of Crete used in their "bull dances." And the centaurs are explained as a story that evolved from the first confused accounts describing humans on horseback.

Modern writers looking for a similar "explanation" to the Amazon accounts have theorized that the stories sprang up from descriptions of female worshippers who were forced to take up arms to defend their temple. Other writers say the accounts were a case of mistaken identity, in which beardless, effeminate Hittite warriors were mistaken for women. There were even writers who suggested that the Amazons were a creation of literature alone, designed to fill a psychological niche in the world view of the Classical Greeks.

Jan Schoo, in his book *Hercules' Labors: Fact or Fiction*, writes that ancient Greeks mistook for Amazons men clad in "bournous like Arabs or Bedouins, carrying white, loose cloaks suitable for the hot desert climate of Asia. For the Greeks such cloaks were women's garments and as women, therefore, the wearers appear in the stories."

The story of beardless men being mistaken for female warriors is patently ridiculous. For one thing, the area traditionally labeled the Amazon homeland – the Black Sea coast of Turkey – is cool and rainy, and thickly forested.

The theory that weapon-carrying "priestesses" were the source of the stories is equally thin. The writings on Amazon culture and history are far too specific and detailed.

A much more plausible "explanation" is that the stories evolved from accounts of the Scythians, a nomadic people who occupied the Ukraine and Georgia and who came into contact with early Greek traders. Excavated graves of Scythians show that women were buried with the weapons of war – the bow, knife, spear and javelin. Certainly there were women warriors in that culture – which was said by ancient writers to have been the culture of origin for the Amazon nation that lived along the shores of the Black Sea, in what is today northern Turkey.

Florence Mary Bennett, in her 1912 book *Religious Cults Associated With the Amazons*, argued that this could not be the entire explanation: "... the oldest records of the Greeks, the Homeric poems, place (the Amazons) near Lycia and Phrygia. In this region the tradition struck down into the soil, as shown by the tales of many cities claiming the Amazons as their founders."

Here she is referring to a separate nation of Amazons, those who originated in Africa and, according to the ancient historians, marched their armies through Egypt and the Middle East to conquer the western coast of Asia Minor centuries before the Trojan War.

She also disputes a second "explanation" of the Amazons – that they were actually warrior priestesses (hieroduli) of the Hittite/Cappadocian deity Ma. The theory held that the Hittites (a nation which dominated central Turkey until around 1200 B.C.) passed stories of these priestesses to the people of Lycia, Lydia and other areas living along the Aegean Sea.

"... it must be replied that Ma is nowhere named in direct connection with the Amazons," Bennett notes, "although she resembles in a general way the female deities whom they were said to have worshipped. Furthermore, in the records of her rites there is no hint of armed hieroduli."

The reluctance to accept a grain of truth (albeit probably exaggerated by legend and distorted by time) in a story of a band of women warriors is most likely rooted in the misogynist attitudes of the 1800s, a century in which the study of ancient Greece really gained in popularity. To historians of this era, the idea of a group of capable women, able to wage wars in their own defense, went against the overwhelming tradition of "history" as a collection of events concerning the lives of men. With the exception of those few women who managed to beat the odds and carve out a niche in

history for themselves, women's history has rarely been told. Why not then relegate the "improbable" story of the Amazons to the realm of myth alone?

In the time of the Classical Greeks, many historians accepted the story of the Amazons as fact. One scholar, Euhemerus (circa 300 B.C.) argued that even the stories of the Olympian gods must have had a basis in truth, and that the "gods" were merely mortal heroes, around whom legends grew.

It should be noted that much of the writing of the ancients, particularly the poems of Homer, were originally thought to have been mere myth. It was not until the amateur archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann persevered in his excavations in Turkey and Greece that the cities of Troy and Mycenae, once thought to have been the stuff of mere legend, were unearthed.

Perhaps one day, the Amazon city of Themiscyra will also be excavated, giving equal validity to the legends of the Amazons.