


Searching for the Amazons: The Real Warrior Women of the Ancient World

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Since the time of the ancient Greeks we have been fascinated by accounts of the Amazons, an elusive tribe of hard-fighting, horse-riding female warriors. Equal to men in battle, legends claimed they cut off their right breasts to improve their archery skills and routinely killed their male children to purify their ranks.

For centuries people believed in their existence and attempted to trace their origins. Artists and poets celebrated their battles and wrote of Amazonia. Spanish explorers, carrying these tales to South America, thought they lived in the forests of the world's greatest river, and named it after them. In the absence of evidence, we eventually reasoned away their existence, concluding that these powerful, sexually liberated female soldiers must have been the fantastical invention of Greek myth and storytelling. Until now.

Following decades of new research and a series of groundbreaking archeological discoveries, we now know these powerful warrior queens did indeed exist. In *Searching for the Amazons*, John Man travels to the grasslands of Central Asia—from the edge of the ancient Greek world to the borderlands of China—to discover the truth about the truth about these women whose legend has resonated over the centuries.

Searching for the Amazons: The Real Warrior Women of the Ancient World Details

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Jessie Scott says

Despite the subtitle, this was less about the famous Amazons of Greek legend and more about the way that the idea of an exclusively female warrior society has been interpreted and adapted by different cultures over the centuries. The narrative was informal and conversational but did feel clunky in places, with the author frequently going off on tangents. However, these threw up some really interesting tidbits - I especially liked the story of how California got its name. Worth a read for sure.

Steven Clark says

I have always been intrigued by Amazons, and even wrote a novel where they figured, and John Man's subject and credentials made me take the book. It is a witty, erudite tale of this mythic/real tribe of warrior women, and Man uses his past experience writing about China, Mongolia, and central Asia to good effect, showing their origins in Scythia, and also farther east. He has a delightful style demonstrating the mythos and recent excavations of possible tombs of Amazons, as well as deviating into the concept of warrior women from Dahomey to the Nachthexen (A Russian all-woman bomber group), to present day Kurdish women. Also a colorful bit on modern mounted women archers.

Inevitably, Man goes to Wonder Woman, and has a humorous digression on her origins. I could have wanted more (has Man never heard of Xena, Warrior Princess?), and the book has tangents, but they are all informative, delightful, and he has a certain style that can be described as Oxford puckish.

The book was a quick read, and is handsomely illustrated. It was a lot of fun to read, and gives you enough information where you might want to look up more on your own.

Anna Stephens says

A thoroughly fascinating look, not only into the myths, legends and evidence for Amazons, but also what defined them as such and then, throughout history, examples of these being shown in the centuries since. With tangents taken into art, the Renaissance, Romanticism, religion and empire-building, John Man has introduced groups of women throughout history I'd never heard of and found to be fascinating.

From the Scythians to the Sarmatians, the Dahomey (now Benin) Ahoisi to the Russian Night Witches and the Kurdish female freedom fighters, this is an exploration of what it means to be an Amazon - or perhaps just a modern woman. Sexual, political and marital revolution, freedom, idealism, patriotism and patriarchy - this book looks at all of them, how they affected women and women's roles, and how women rebelled against them.

Wonder Woman of course gets a mention, but so do the modern 'sports' and 'arts' of horseback archery which the original Amazons were famous for.

Hugely recommended.

Nikki says

Iset says

For the first few chapters of this book, I thought I would be comparing it to Adrienne Mayor's *The Amazons*. It aimed to take a long hard look at the truth behind the legends, and dispel the myths. The initial chapters mimic Mayor's first chapters, delving into the etymology of 'Amazon' (and why it does not mean 'single-breasted'), the culture and society of the Scythians, and the archaeological finds of women warrior graves, the evidence of battle wounds, and the weaponry they were buried with. So far, so good, although John Man tends to shorter, less detailed chapters which are aimed more firmly at the layman. I was anticipating saying something in this review like 'a well-written book all in all, but why read this simplified version when you could read Mayor's equally engaging and more detailed one?'

Then the book took an unexpected turn. Over half of the book is devoted to later interpretations and reimaginings of the Amazons, from amazon.com, the Amazon river, other distant societies who had female fighting forces in the past 200 years which obviously has nothing to do with the Amazons (besides possibly being inspired by them), to Wonder Woman. Maybe that's of interest to the layman that picks up this book, but it really has nothing to do with the ancient Amazons that the book's tagline claims it examines, and I personally was disappointed. Mayor goes into the subject much more thoroughly, and keeps focus throughout. I would honestly recommend her book instead.

One thing that Man's book does have over Mayor's is that the author does dispel Thalestris, the Amazon queen who supposedly visited Alexander. As Man points out, the story has suspicious details that just don't fit: the travel time from the Amazon heartlands to Hyrcania, and, all too conveniently, Thalestris and any possible child from the encounter are never seen or heard of again. Not to mention, the original purveyor of the tale is suspect in his credibility. In my view this is a far more probable and realistic assessment of Thalestris than Adrienne Mayor gave the tale.

All in all however, not the read I was hoping for.

6 out of 10

Elizabeth says

3.5 stars. The content was great, but the writing wasn't.

This book can tell you just about everything you ever wanted to know about Amazons; it explores the myths of warrior women from Ancient Greece and after, but it also chronicles actual groups of women fighters from throughout history. It shows what was real and what wasn't, and it offers some very detailed glimpses of a few key moments. This book is also meticulously researched. That said, the writing is difficult to follow. There are not a lot of dates given (possibly to make it more readable) but it just makes things more confusing. This happened, and then two months later, that happened; then some years after this, so-and-so

died, but before she died, she did this, that, and the other—I'm sorry, but when are we? Things might have made more sense if it had been told chronologically. There are also a few moments of carelessness. He occasionally oversimplifies to the point of distortion. He's not objective; he very clearly respects the people he's writing about, and that's a good thing. However, he has a bad habit of stating his own opinions as though they were fact. He doesn't do it much, but he shouldn't do it at all. This is good history, and it deserved a better book, but John Man clearly put a lot of work into his research, and this informative volume is worth reading.^a

Beth says

This book was more than I thought it would be! Besides just tracing the potential sources of the ancient Greek myth of the Amazons - the all-female society of warriors - this book traced the waxing and waning of the myth throughout the centuries, explained how the Amazon river got its name, how the legendary horseback archery skills of the Amazons and other horse tribes of the Steppes have made a resurgence, and explored female warrior societies/groups in the recent past (including an army of vicious warrior women in 1800s Africa, and the feared and famed "Night Witches" female pilots of the Soviet military during WWII).

There were a few tangents and rabbit holes that took the book off course and didn't add much/weren't relevant to the purpose of the book, and some portions were pretty wordy. But overall, a really interesting read that I learned a lot from.

*Thanks to NetGalley for the ARC, provided by the author and/or the publisher in exchange for an honest review.

Rebecca Hill says

Fantastically written!

This book takes on the history, or lack thereof, of the women of the Amazon. I enjoyed the read! Not only do you get the myths, the legends, and the stories passed down, but what history is there is shared. John Man did a great job with this book, and I look forward to getting a hard copy of this book, to re-read and make notes in the margins! Great jumping off book for those who are looking to do some research or wanting to gain a deeper understanding of these warrior women.

Kinsey says

I feel like I owe an apology to the author. I must admit that when I picked this book up, it was with a slowly creeping sense of dread at a book about the sociological significance of the Amazonian legends being written by a *man*. However, this book was delightfully feminist (and hilarious) in everything from the threat the Amazons posed upon the Greek's fragile masculinity in the original myth, to the way that women warriors in several Eurasian cultures baffled early archaeologists, to the way that modern day Amazons (ala Diana Prince) continue to inspire.

I highly recommend this book if you're looking for a fascinating and comprehensive history into the mythos

of the Amazons, in addition to highlighting several equally fascinating cultures in which women have played a large role in governance and/or war.

Nita says

I got this book as a Goodread's Giveaway and I really enjoyed it. The book was easy to read and flowed well. I hope in the final version the pictures are of a better quality and it would help if they were closer to the relevant sections in the book. It was interesting to follow the path of the myth of the amazons from the Greeks to present and how it influenced culture.

Angela says

Interesting book on women in history.

Review copy provided by NetGalley in exchange for an honest review.

Laurie says

I enjoyed the first half of the book wherein the author discusses the mythic Amazons of ancient Greece (from the historical writings of Herodotus) and the actual woman warriors of the Sycythian peoples of historic Central Asia. The archeological finds from Scythian burial mounds, often referred to as kurgan, sound fascinating. These finds make a good case for the warrior women on horseback who road equal to men as mounted archers, swooping down on the ancient Greek settlements around the Black Sea being the Amazons that have so captured the imagination of history. Even the chapter of the resurrection of mounted archery as a sport, begun in Hungary, is interesting. But after this the author reaches to make connections that just don't interest me. The author does 'Search' for the Amazons; all the way to Wonder Woman. I just wasn't interested past the Amazons of the ancient world.

Sarah Gaff says

Disappointing. I expected an in-depth look into the myths from ancient times regarding the Amazons. It started out that way & there is occasionally such sprinkled throughout the book but I was annoyed that the book is mainly the author's (quite negative & contemptuous) opinion on whatever subjects the writing tends to run off to (which happens frequently). I was also annoyed by the assumption of reader stupidity. Yes, obviously we all know a race of superhuman goddesses did not exist. Yet the author makes a point to keep telling readers what is clearly fictional, as if we weren't capable of knowing this ourselves. Towards the end, it branches off into slightly veiled propaganda for socialism. To say I was disappointed & annoyed is an understatement. I gave it two stars for the tidbits here & there of backstory on where the myths came from. However, would not recommend.

Bea Harvie says

I'm not sure what I was expecting when i first bought this book - I though it looked interesting but as I'm not a big non-fiction reader I didn't think beyond 'interesting'. This book is an exploration of myths, hearsay, assumptions, archaeology, anthropology, feminism and Greek and a myriad of other subjects. it was well written, witty and entirely suitable for a layperson who only picked the book up because the mythology behind the Amazon's sounded like it might be fun. John Man drops comments and sarcastic quips the whole way through, making the text far easier to read than if it had been presented as 'serious'.

In fact, I am contemplating buying one of John Man's other history books and this has definitely highlighted several texts around Wonder Woman and the Amazon's that I should keep an eye out for. I really enjoyed reading this, and I am willing to try other non-fiction pop science/history books because of this!

Ann says

This is a well written, well researched and entertaining book. The legendary Amazon tribe of warrior women who killed the males born to the tribe at birth but raised the females to be warriors never existed. But graves in the mountainous regions of China containing women bearing battle wounds and buried with weapons have been found and are numerous. The legends, which were written down by Herodotus, probably stem from these women.

But there is more to the book than this. The author has a chapter on the recent rise of horseback archery, a difficult skill to learn and one that vanished into obscurity with the invention of gun powder. It's now a sport and women are as efficient as men at it. There's even a chapter connecting the Amazons with Amazon.com and the creation of Wonder Woman.

The author assumes interest and intelligence but not knowledge so the book isn't buried under jargon and dry, long winded sentences. There is a good Bibliography for further research and reading .

For me, this is a library book and I have to get it back soon. But I would have enjoyed it more if I owned it and could read it here and there, a chapter at a time, as I felt like it. It's that kind of book.
