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# Greeks, Amazons, and Archaeology

James F. Vedder<sup>1</sup>

*Los Altos Hills, California*

The legends of the Amazons and their battles with the Greeks were popular subjects of ancient Greek art. Images of lone Amazons, of combat between an Amazon and a Greek hero, of general battle scenes,<sup>2</sup> and occasionally of more amicable meetings appear in vase painting, sculpture, and other forms of art. The earliest representation known was made about 700 BCE [Schefold 1966, pp. 24-25, plate 7b]. The subjects appeared frequently in the fifth century BCE, eventually rivaling the popularity of depictions of centaurs [*Encyclopedia Britannica* (1957)].

Did Amazons really exist? Many modern writers deem them to be mythical beings as are the satyrs and centaurs. Others believe them to be symbols of the Persian or other peoples menacing the Greek borders and colonies. Still others believe that they may have been members of matriarchal societies of the Bronze Age.

Extant ancient written records, surviving in full, in fragments, or in reference by others, also relate tales of the Amazons. Homer, the eighth century BCE Greek poet [Taplin 1986; duBois 1982, p. 33], tells in the *Iliad* of the arrival of the Amazons to aid in the defense of Troy besieged by the Greeks. Other ancient writers mention Queen Penthesilea, who led her band of female warriors to aid King Priam of Troy.<sup>3</sup> After her companions have been slain, she fights on valiantly, dispatching many Greeks until Achilles with a single mighty thrust of his sword kills her and her horse. In the fifth

century BCE, Herodotus, the Greek historian born in Halicarnassus, wrote of the Sauromatae.<sup>4</sup> These nomadic people lived east of the Don river before, during, and after his lifetime. One practice occurring in his time that seemed to impress Herodotus was the participation of the women in battle alongside the men. To give credence to this warrior image, he relates the myth of the beginnings of the Sauromatians. It so happened that the Amazons, imprisoned in three Greek ships on the Black Sea, overpowered and dispatched the crews. But lacking any knowledge of sailing, they eventually drifted ashore in the Scythian lands. In the aftermath of an ensuing skirmish, the Scythians found from the corpses left on the battlefield that the intruders plundering their land were women. The warriors, in awe of their opponents' abilities, conceived a plan to enhance their own stock. They withdrew all but the youngest warriors, who were instructed to camp near the Amazons and to avoid battle. Eventually, after one chance meeting of a couple, they soon were all paired and joined camps. In time, saying "of womanly employments we know nothing" and not abiding the life of Scythian women, the Amazons chose not to join the elder Scythians and persuaded their mates to move northeastward beyond the Don river. So began the Sarmatians. All the wives continued their nomadic customs, and, wearing the same style of clothes that the men did, rode and fought alongside them.

Was Herodotus accurate in his accounts of these nomadic

people? Did they give rise to the legends of the Amazons? Herodotus gathered his information about 450 BCE during his stay on the northern coast of the Black Sea at Olbia, the hub of the gold trade route between Europe and Asia [Rolle 1989, pp. 13-14; Sulimirski and Taylor 1991, pp. 583]. Much of his information came from travelers who had passed through the territories of the nomads. In modern chronology, the interval of the sixth and fifth century BCE is termed the Sauromatian period. Some population movements and cultural change characterized the Early Sarmatian period of the next two centuries. The following five or six centuries are split into the Middle and Late Sarmatian periods. Throughout these periods, there was continuity in the main customs of these ancient nomads of the Eurasian steppes, which extend from the Carpathian Mountains eastward to the Altai Mountains and have continued to be inhabited by nomads until recent times. The Sarmatians lived in the region between the Caspian Sea and the foothills of the Ural Mountains from about 600 BCE to at least 100 BCE. To the west around the northern shores of the Black Sea were the Scythians; to the south and east in what is now Kazakhstan were the Saka. The Sarmatians were in the region of convergence of eastern and western cultures. Hence, the relics of their lives are of great archaeological interest.

Is the archaeological record in accord with the ancient descriptions of these people? Since they were nomads, only their kurgans (burial mounds) can attest to their lives. In the summers of 1992 and 1993, I participated in the excavation of kurgans at Pokrovka, in the middle of the area inhabited by the Sarmatians during Herodotus' time. The findings from the area under investigation by this project should add

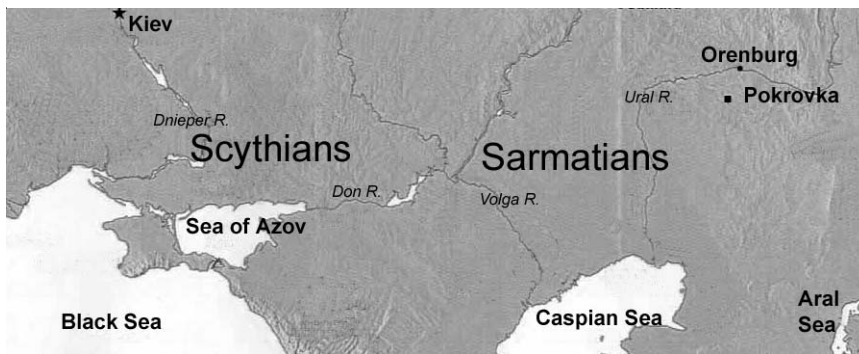


Fig. 1. Map of the steppe region, showing the location of Pokrovka.

substantially to the knowledge of these nomadic people. What follows here are some of the results which correlate with the ancient depictions of the Amazons.

The area of the excavations is in a tongue of Russian land protruding some 55 km. southward into Kazakhstan and situated about 160 km. south of Orenburg and 500 km. north of the Caspian Sea (Fig. 1). The site is named for Pokrovka, a village of about 4000 inhabitants some 6 km. to the west and the center for the state farm which manages the vast fields of wheat and corn nearby. The excavation team camped on the south bank of the Khobda river, a few kilometers from each of the two necropoleis selected for excavation in 1992 and from an additional one excavated in 1993. Due to a quirk in the boundary lines here, the north side of the river some 10 meters away is Kazakh land. In addition to the archaeologists, the excavation team included geologists, physicists, soil scientists, artists, architects,

engineers, programmers, a historian, a medical doctor, and a mathematician.

The Pokrovka excavations had begun in the summer of 1991, focusing on 14 Sarmatian necropoleis surveyed in 1990 by Dr. Leonid T. Yablonsky of the Institute of Archaeology, Russian Academy of Sciences. One necropolis of these nomadic people contained dozens of burial mounds, or kurgans; another contained only one. The excavations in 1992 and 1993 were the result of the joint efforts of the Russian/American Department of the Kazakh/American Research Project whose director was Dr. Jeannine Davis-Kimball, Dr. Yablonsky of the Institute of Archaeology of the Russian Academy of Sciences and his crew, and a group of students from the Pedagogical Institute of Orenburg led by Dr. Nina L. Morgunova. The author participated as the field representative for Dr. Davis-Kimball.<sup>5</sup> In addition, there were other Americans present, two in 1992 and four in 1993.



Fig. 2. A large kurgan (44 m. diameter) in a wheat field (Pokrovka necropolis 3, kurgan 4).

Figure 2 shows a large kurgan in Pokrovka necropolis 3 in a wheat field as an example of the appearance of a burial mound before excavation. For training the students from the Pedagogical Institute of Orenburg, the second kurgan of Pokrovka necropolis 8 was excavated by the classical method of leaving bunks along the north-south and east-west diameters (Fig. 3). The soil above the original surface as well as the ancient humus layer was removed by shovels. On most of the other kurgans because of limited time and manpower, and the large volume of soil involved, a bulldozer and a grader were utilized to remove the soil above the level of the original soil surface except for one or more



Fig. 3. A kurgan excavation showing bunks along the west to east and north to south diameters.

bunks left in the north to south direction. The dark colored humus layer was then removed by shoveling. The surface of the light colored soil underneath was then shaved with flat, square-ended spades to locate changes in soil color and texture that indicate the presence of burial pits within the perimeter of the kurgan.

The excavation of a pit began on one side of a line dividing the surface level of the pit in half. The resulting central wall provides a record of the stratigraphy of the soils within the pit. Usually the soil is loosened in 10- to 20-centimeter-thick layers by careful use of a nearly flat spade with a



Fig. 4. Tomb of a 40- to 45-year-old, Early Sarmatian female (necropolis 8, kurgan 1, burial 6, 1992).

pointed end. The loosened soil from each layer is removed from the pit with a shovel. After something of interest is found, the excavation proceeds with the large kitchen knife customary for the Russians or the small mason's trowel customary for the Americans. Brushes are used to sweep the loosened soil aside for subsequent removal from the pit by shoveling. Once human bone is encountered, the excavator determines the orientation and extent of the skeleton with a minimum of exposure of bone, completes the exposure of the original sides of the pit in the excavated half, and neatly shaves the central wall to reveal the soil profile. If there is any stratigraphy of interest, the profile is recorded with photography and drafting by the archaeologist and student architect, respectively. Then the excavator carefully removes the soil from the other half of the pit to the level of the skeleton. Since the skeleton and any associated artifacts must be uncovered, cleaned, photographed, drawn in situ, and then removed in one day, this final work is often postponed to the following day. It takes from two to six hours to accomplish these final tasks.

One of the most interesting burials relative to the Amazons was uncovered in tomb 6 of kurgan 1, necropolis 8. This 30 m. diameter kurgan constructed in the Bronze Age in the 11th c. BCE contained two Bronze Age, three Medieval, and eleven Early Sarmatian burials. Tomb 6 had not

been disturbed. The supine skeleton lay with the skull to the south, legs extended, and the arms at the sides (Fig. 4). Southwest of the skull was a ceramic vessel with diagonal indentations

across the rim; southeast of the skull was a small vase-shaped ceramic vessel, orange in color, with remnants of red pigment. Northwest of the feet were a ceramic jug with a handle and a



Fig. 5. Detail of the woman's tomb showing the iron dagger and iron arrowheads (the latter not easily distinguishable).

ceramic vessel adjacent to bones of a large animal. In addition, near the right forearm lay an iron dagger (Fig. 5); and between the legs were two iron arrowheads. From the skeletal remains, the person was identified as a woman, 40 to 45 years old. The shape of the weapons and the ceramic vessels are typical of the Early Sarmatian period of the fourth and third century BCE. Here very likely is the tomb of a warrior woman. Close by in this kurgan, burial 15 contained a 25- to 30-year-old woman with two iron arrowheads. She also had bronze earrings wrapped with gold foil, glass beads, a ceramic vessel and an iron knife resting on some animal bones. In the nearby smaller kurgan 5, tomb 2 held the remains of a 25- to 30-year-old woman with bronze and

iron arrowheads and a whetstone.

There were two very interesting tombs in necropolis 2 which stretches northward along the crest of high ground toward the bluff overlooking the Khobda river and the project's campsite. The first tomb was number two of the two found in kurgan 3, a 30 m. diameter mound. The pit had a wooden cover in place and was undisturbed by robbers. The neighboring pit, in contrast, had been looted and badly disturbed. In the grave of interest, the skeleton was in the supine position with the skull to the west at a level about two meters below the ancient soil surface (Fig. 6). This was the burial of a woman of importance from the sixth century BCE. There were unarticulated camel and horse bones on the floor of the pit along the south wall. To the southwest of her skull and at the western end of the animal bones was a ceramic vessel. Near her feet were sheep bones. Near her right hand was a small ceramic vessel with red pigmentation on



Fig. 6. Tomb of a mid-sixth century BCE Sauromatian "priestess" with gold ornaments, a carved stone altar and other artifacts (necropolis 2, kurgan 3, burial 2, 1993).



its exterior. By the pit wall and northwest of the skull were an oval bronze mirror and a carved stone vessel, or altar. One corner of the rim of this altar was missing, but it was found under her left knee during the final procedures of excavation. The altar might have been broken as part of the burial rites. The bronze mirror was complete except for a missing handle. There was a band of granulation on the back near the perimeter except for a gap where the handle had been attached. The central area had some design or image obscured by corrosion.



Fig. 7. The gold panthers and conical gold pendants in situ around the neck of the "priestess."

There were numerous small pale blue-green glass beads scattered about the skeleton, possibly evidence of decorations on a garment. Three stamped gold plaques in the form of recumbent panthers were uncovered around her neck (Fig. 7). Each had perforations near the edges for attachment. One plaque was torn into three pieces. At each side of the skull was an enclosed cone of gold soldered at the apex to a gold loop with a gap. These served as earrings or pendants from a diadem. There were also some coral, carnelian, and glass beads, and five fossil shells of marine mollusks (Fig. 8). There were no weapons in this grave, but the woman was obviously an important member of this society. Women buried with altars are often classified as priestesses



Fig. 8. A display of the small artifacts from the tomb of the "priestess." The two ceramic vessels are not shown. On the left is the stone vessel with a chipped corner glued in place. The oval bronze mirror at the top center has granulation around the perimeter and a central design. Below the mirror are the gold pendants, small gold beads, gold panthers, glass and stone beads, and a carved bone. At the right are a piece of ore and fossil shells of marine mollusks.

[Jettmar 1967, p. 60] and may have performed various rites and sacrifices for their people. There were a few other artifacts in this burial including a small carved bone object.

The other tomb of special interest was in a shaft with a narrow ledge near the top for

supporting a wooden cover. The supine skeleton with the skull to the southwest is that of a tall, strong man about 50 years of age from the third or second century BCE (Fig. 9). An iron dagger lay by his right hand. Nearby were residues of a scabbard and gold foil decoration. There was a gold



Fig. 9. Tomb of a warrior about 50 years old from the second or third century BCE (necropolis 2, kurgan 17, burial 2, 1993).

band that probably was part of the dagger or scabbard. The gold band looks like finely woven cloth (Fig. 10). On his left side, about 20 iron arrowheads, remnants of



Fig. 10. Artifacts from the tomb of the warrior. The orange ceramic jug is not shown.

a quiver, and a bronze plate with traces of gilt were uncovered. This plate had been modified with two pairs of holes for attachment to the quiver with leather thongs looped through the holes. The leather is still preserved by copper salts from the corrosion of the bronze. Originally the plate was probably a belt buckle as indicated by the two holes at one end and the slot at the other. The design on this plate is the typical animal style of the nomads depicting carnivores attacking other animals, in this case a horse. There was a gold band around the right arm near the wrist. Each terminal is incised with eyes, nose, mouth, and scales to represent snake heads. Near the northeast corner of the pit, there was an orange colored ceramic jug with a handle. It was made on a potter's wheel in some workshop in middle Asia. An unusual feature of this burial is the position of the lower legs. Both had been neatly severed from the body at the knees. The reason is unknown. Perhaps this old warrior, renowned in battle over his many years of life, was felled by his enemy who severed his legs to ensure that he would never fight again in this world or

the next and left him in the battlefield to die. His comrades recovered his remains and gave him a burial fitting his rank, age, and wealth. We are left to ponder his fate and wonder about the tales he must have told of his feats of combat.

How might we interpret the archaeological evidence? At this site near Pokrovka and elsewhere in the lands of the Sarmatians, skeletons of women buried with weapons have been uncovered. We discovered bronze and iron arrowheads in several tombs and a dagger and iron arrowheads in another. Others have found these weapons as well as spears, swords, and armor [Rolle 1989, p. 88]. In the region inhabited by the Sarmatians, about 20% of burials associated with weapons and horse harnesses were of females [Rolle 1989, p. 89]. Were these weapons actually evidence of women involved in combat; or were they possibly heirlooms, means of self-defense, or equipment for hunting on the journey to an afterlife? The dagger could be an heirloom or a weapon for self-defense but not an instrument for hunting. If it were an heirloom, it could not be very old since its style and shape are consistent with the dating of the other artifacts in the particular burial. Changes in styles and shapes generally occur in less than a century, which would mean that any relatively old items in a tomb would give conflicting ages for the burial. Arrows would not be considered for self-defense but useful for hunting in the afterlife. Perhaps they believed that they would participate in battles in the afterlife and would need their weapons of combat. The quantity of weapons in some burials indicates such a belief. In Sarmatian burials in other areas, the discovery of women with

broken and pierced skulls and arrowheads embedded in bone strongly supports the view that these women did participate in battles [Rolle 1989, p. 88]. Herodotus stated that the women rode alongside the men or alone in hunting or battle [Herodotus 1956, IV, p. 239].

Did these women described by Herodotus in the fifth century BCE and found by archaeological investigations give rise to the Greek legends of the Amazons? There are some chronological difficulties. The archaeological evidence for the Sarmatians of Herodotus' time indicates that these nomads first appeared in the area in the sixth century BCE [Jettmar 1967, p. 60]. But Homer in the *Iliad* wrote of the band of Amazons that came to the aid of King Priam of Troy besieged by the Greeks [Taplin 1986]. Homer probably lived within the period from 750 to 650 BCE and was writing of events that occurred much earlier [Ibid.]. The stories had been remembered and passed on orally from generation to generation until finally put into writing. Most arguments attribute the events to the Mycenaean Age, 1400 to 1100 BCE. Finley makes a strong case for the Dark Age, 1050 to 900 BCE [Finley 1978]. The latest time that the events could have occurred would be Homer's own time [Taplin 1986]. Even if this were true, Homer probably died before the appearance of the Sauromatians, as indicated by the archaeological evidence [Jettmar 1967, p. 60]. Findings from recent excavations east of the Caspian Sea suggest that these earliest Sarmatians may have been Saka nomads whose origins have been traced to Central Asia in the eighth or possibly ninth century BCE [Yablonsky 1990, p. 292]. These dates give a closer chronological agreement with Homer's Amazons, but the area is much more remote from the Greeks. The Scythian nomads north of the Black Sea and west

of the Sarmatians also had burials of women warriors but not as commonly as the Sarmatians [Rolle 1989, p. 89]. The Scythians first appeared in the eighth or ninth century BCE according to the archaeological record [Rolle 1989, p. 132; Sulimirski and Taylor 1991, p. 561]. Scythian chronology is thus similar to that of the Saka, and, given the geographic proximity to the Greeks, contact between them and Scythians was quite likely. But the time is some centuries after the commonly accepted period of the events of the *Iliad*.

What do the images of Amazons in Greek art show us? The first known one, on a clay shield from Tiryns dated to about 700 BCE, depicts Herakles fighting Amazons [Schefold 1966, pp. 24-25, plate 7b].<sup>6</sup> Through much of the Classical period, they are portrayed in sculpture as buxom, sensuous females wearing clothing and bearing weapons similar to those of the Greek warriors. I would expect a woman well trained and skilled in combat to have a trim, lean figure and to dress in her native costume [See also Rolle 1989, p. 90]. Herodotus said of the women of the Sauromatae that they "dress like the men" [Herodotus 1956, IV, p. 239]. Shapiro notes that the Greek artists of the Archaic period portrayed all their adversaries in battle with the same style of dress and weaponry as worn by the Greeks [Shapiro 1983, pp. 105-114]. It is only later portrayals which show, in succession, the Amazons in dress similar to Thracian, Scythian, and Persian apparel. Thus, Greek art is of no help, especially when produced long after whatever historical events stimulated the imagery. In their art, the Greeks were interested in portraying beauty. For males, they tended to use athletes as models. For Amazons, they lacked any real models and therefore con-

centrated on the beauty and sensuality of their ideal female form.

There were changes in the style and subject of Greek art paralleling social and political changes. Shapiro traces the evidence of Amazons in Greek art and literature and shows the changes from Thracian to Scythian and then Persian influences in depictions of Amazons [Ibid.]. Greek literature originated some time after the first art, elaborated on the stories portrayed and may have relied on the art as the primary source of information about the Amazons. Shapiro maintains that the earliest images on vase paintings associating Amazons with Thrace and Scythia are closer to the truth than the later art and literature. The early works show the encounters of the popular mythical heroes with Amazons, first Heracles, then Achilles, and finally Theseus.

Does the origin of the word Amazon tell us anything? The *Britannica* dictionary states that the Greek root means "without breast."<sup>7</sup> More correctly, it means not to suckle.<sup>8</sup> According to ancient literature, the Amazons cauterized or mutilated the right breast of young girls to destroy its function and development because it would interfere with the drawing of the bow and throwing of the spear and would take strength from the right arm and shoulder [Serwint 1993, p. 403-422; Rolle 1989, p. 91]. Serwint states that there are no known cases in Greek art of Amazons depicted without a right breast [Serwint 1993]. She believes that this follows from the artists' striving for beauty and perfection and their abhorring any display of physical shortcomings of their subjects. She suggests that the exposure of the right breast in images in Amazons is a symbol of the missing anatomy. Alternatively, it might be to show the Greeks that

they are being attacked by women.

The mythical tribes and nations of Amazons probably did not exist in reality, but there may have been bands of women which went to war for various causes. In her compilation on Amazons throughout history Salmonson notes a number of cases where women banded together to do combat for causes such as the crusades and the French Revolution [Salmonson 1991]. She also suggests that there may have been some religious centers that attracted "goddess worshiping, highly athletic women of the ancient world" and that Themiscyra, the capital of Amazonia, was such a center and did exist. Dietrich Von Bothmer has identified a scene on a Greek vase as a depiction of the gates of Themiscyra [Von Bothmer 1957, pl. 10].

Each of us carries a mental image of the Amazon of the ancient world. In the words of Jessica A. Salmonson:

The Amazon archetype appears to be highly mutable, and easily interpreted according to the whims of subjective taste. The Amazon was an antisexual [*sic*] man hater, or she was an aggressive, demanding sex object. She served the system by emulating men, or she was a rebel expanding the meaning of femininity, a threat to patriarchy. She was a demeaning, impossible fabrication, or she was an upraising, revelatory reality. She was objectified as fearful and repellent, glamorous and appealing; a destructive and negative role model, or one that was ideal and suitable for all young girls. For many, the Amazon was a fascination, a fixation, a flirtation, to hate or to admire. [Salmonson 1991, p. x]



## About the Author

**James F. Vedder** earned a PhD in Experimental Nuclear Physics at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1958. He retired in 1992 after a distinguished career as a research scientist for Lockheed and NASA. Since 1984 he has been involved in archaeological excavations world wide. He has published articles on experimental archaeology demonstrating how the Greeks painted precise sets of concentric circles on pots 3000 years ago and how the artisans of Çatalhöyük, Turkey, made mirrors of obsidian. He is a member of the American Physical Society, the American Geophysical Union, Sigma Xi, and the American Institute of Archaeology.

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## Notes

1. This paper originated as an invited, slide-illustrated presentation for a Stanford University Continuing Studies Program class, "Greek and Roman Art," taught in autumn 1993 by the since deceased Emeritus Professor of Classics Antony Raubitschek (1912-1999). The subject was then submitted in 1994 as a report to satisfy a class requirement. This present version has incorporated some of Professor Raubitschek's comments and suggestions. I am indebted to him for his comments and keen interest in Amazons. All excavation photographs are my own.

2. The temple of Mausolus in Halicarnassus had an Amazonomachy depicted on one of the several friezes encircling the building at different levels. In 355 BCE, five sculptors were commissioned to decorate the exterior, one for each side and one for the pinnacle. On one extant fragment, the Amazon on the right with feet planted and body facing outward is attacking a Greek with one knee to the ground and shield raised to fend off the blows [Scarre 1993, p. 34.] Her chiton covers both breasts in contrast to the common practice of exposing the right breast (as we see in Fig. 11, from a different fragment of the



Fig. 11. Detail of Halicarnassus frieze showing bare-breasted Amazon.

frieze). An Amazon on the left rides bareback astride a rearing horse without saddle or reins. She is leaning around the far side of her steed's neck with her right arm raised. Her left leg, exposed to her hip, is bent at the knee and her shin is parallel to the horse's belly. Her other leg dangles down on the other side. On another fragment [Fig. 12, to which Fig. 11 attaches on the left], the Amazon on the right lunges forward with a himation streaming behind and with weapon raised above the cowering, helmeted Greek with his shield raised in defense. On

riding backward without saddle or reins and probably shooting an arrow. This image depicts the expert horsemanship attributed to the Amazons. We must remember that the Greeks aimed for beauty in their work and often reality suffered. For these and additional Amazon images, see Rodenwaldt 1927, pp. 428-429, 357, 434.

3. Salmonson 1991, pp. 210-212; Rolle 1989, p. 86, believes that the most informative source for Penthesilea is the poetry of Quintus of Smyrna.

4. Herodotus 1956, IV, pp. 237-

the left, an Amazon on horseback is leaning toward the left and also riding bareback with left leg bent at the knee. This leg is exposed to the hip with the drape of the chiton almost exactly as on the rider in the first fragment. Her right knee can be seen over the horse's back. Amazingly, she is

239. Now these earliest tribes of Sarmatian nomads are called Sauromatians.

5. The second largest kurgan in necropolis 2 was excavated the first season (1991). In 1992, all 6 kurgans of necropolis 8 located on the left bank of the Khobda river about 5 km. east of Pokrovka and the largest kurgan of necropolis 2 were excavated. In 1993, 10 of 17 kurgans of necropolis 1, 4 km. southeast of Pokrovka, and 10 more in necropolis 2 were excavated. The work and findings through 1993 have been reported in Iablonskii 1993 (1995); Iablonskii 1994. The effort in 1994-1995 was supported by the Russian Institute of Archaeology and the Kazakh/American Research Project. Since then excavations have been continued by Dr. Yablonsky with the support of the Russian Institute of Archaeology.

6. See a photo of the shield, now in The Archaeological Museum of Nauplion, at <http://www.culture.gr/2/21/211/21104m/00/lk04m047.jpg>.

7. *Britannica World Language Dictionary*, Vol.1. (Chicago, 1966), p. 45.

8. Antony Raubitschek, private communication.



Fig. 12. Detail of Halicarnassus frieze with two Amazons and a Greek warrior.