

AN AMAZONIAN CUSTOM IN THE CAUCASUS

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An Amazonian Custom in the Caucasus

One of the best known legends of classical authors relates to a fabled nation of warlike women, deprived of the use of one breast by a process of cauterisation and known as Amazons. According to a well authenticated custom, still current among the Cherkes or Adighé, the Abkhas, and to some extent among the Ossets,^[1] the growth of both breasts during maidenhood is artificially repressed by means of a leather corset. The object of this paper is to offer an explanation for the origin of the modern custom, and to show reason for believing it to be lineally descended from an older one anterior to the time of Herodotus, and having, therefore, a possible ancestry of twenty-five centuries.

In Asia, which at that period was separated from Europe by the river Don, the ancient Greeks knew of Amazons in two localities: on the banks of the Thermodon near Sinope, and on the isthmus north of the great chain of the Caucasus. It is probable they first became acquainted with those that lay nearest them, and accounted for those they heard of afterwards in the neighbourhood of the Caucasus by an imaginary migration, such as Herodotus relates. Some of the reports that may have been true of the Amazons of the Thermodon were very likely transferred without sufficient ground to the Amazons of the Caucasus. Whether there existed any nearer connection between the two groups than that both performed some operation upon the right breast, and had some customs in common, does not concern us here. We may, therefore, dismiss the legends referring to the westerly Amazons, and confine our attention to the easterly variety.

First, we have to establish as nearly as possible their actual geographical position. According to Herodotus, Amazons were found among the Sauromatai, who lived between four and five days' journey north-east of the upper end of the Sea of Azov. Hippocrates places the Sauromatai in Eurape, that is to say, west of the Don and of the Sea of Azov. But Scylax, in his *Periplus* of the Euxine, locates them much in the same position as Herodotus, on the left bank of the Don and contiguous to the Maiotai. Scymnus of Chios and the second anonymous author of the *Periplus*, place them in Europe, and identify the Maiotai with the Sauromatai, who were themselves a tribe of the Sarmatai. Strabo gives us three versions, which do not greatly differ. According to one, the Amazons were believed to live among the mountains above Albania (the lower valley of the Kur), but separated from the Albanians by the Scythian tribes of Gelai and Legai,^[2] and by the Mermadalis river^[3] (Terek?). Others maintained that the Amazons bordered upon the Gargarenses, who lived at the northern foot of the Caucasian mountains, called Ceraunia, by which Strabo meant the south-eastern end of the range. According to a third report, the country of the Amazons and of the Siracene^[4] was traversed by a rapid torrent called the Mermodas, which descended from the mountains and discharged into the Sea of Azov.

From these accounts it may be assumed that certain customs, summarised under the term Amazon, prevailed among tribes that occupied an area bounded on the south by the northern slopes of the Caucasus, though, perhaps, only as far south as the Terek from the point where this river bends eastwards; on the east by the Caspian Sea; on the west by the Black Sea, the Sea of Azov and the Don, perhaps even by an undefined line to the west of that river; on the north the limits were undetermined by any natural feature, but extended for a distance of three or of fifteen days' march—Herodotus gives both distances in different passages—north of the mouth of the Don.

Having localised the area within which Amazonian customs were disseminated, the next step is to identify, if possible, the Sauromatai, a tribe, as we have seen, of the Sarmatai, with some of the existing nations of the Caucasus. As ethnic names, both of these are undoubtedly lost, though it is alleged by a native Cherkes author that the word *Sharmat* is still remembered, and that some Cherkes families claim to be descended from the ancient Sarmatians^[5] Herodotus distinguishes between the Scythians west of the Don and the non-Scythians to the east of the river, though at the same time he supposes the Sauromatai to be a mixed race of Scythian men and Amazon women from the banks of the Thermodon. His theory that the people were half-breeds seems to have been framed by himself or his informants to account for two facts, or supposed facts: the prevalence of certain customs known to exist in another part of Asia, which could only be explained, so far as he or his informant could see, by a migration—in reality fictitious—from there to the Don region; the fact, probably quite erroneous, that the Sauromatai spoke broken Scythian, as the women descended from the Amazons of the Thermodon had never learnt perfectly the language of their husbands. Here I take it the word Scythian is used in a wider and looser sense than in that generally employed by Herodotus, for he gained the information through hearsay, and may therefore be taken to include a Caucasian language. If there is a grain of truth in the statement, it is that the men and women did not always speak the same dialect: that the Sauromatai were, in fact, like the Cherkes, exogamous. Hippocrates, who wrote a little later than Herodotus, though he places the Sauromatai west of the Don, is very positive in his assertion that they were different from other nations, and therefore from the Scyths. Strabo, writing shortly before the beginning of the Christian era, says of seventy nations, all speaking different languages, that used to assemble at the Colchidian mart of Dioscurias, that they were chiefly Sarmatians, but all of them Caucasian tribes. Talking of the Iberians, the modern Imeretians and Georgians, he mentions that those of them inhabiting the mountains lived like the Sarmatians and Scythians, on whose country they bordered and with whom they were connected by affinity of race. The Scythians here referred to are no doubt the Gelai and Legai tribes, belonging to the Caucasus. He places the Albanians in the lower valley of the Kur, east of the Alazan, and makes the Caucasus their northern boundary, apparently confining them to the plain. But as they were reported to speak twenty-six languages, and could bring a larger force into the field than the Iberians, it is evident that many hill tribes must be included in their number, and this people is now doubtless represented by the Lesgians. Of the nationalities occupying the northern slopes of the main Chain, the Lesgians, therefore, and perhaps the Chechents, if the Gelai are represented by the Galgai, are to be excluded from the Sarmatai, and then we are left with the Cherkes and the Abkhas. A few centuries ago, the Adighé occupied a great part of the area previously inhabited by the Sauromatai, Maiotai, and other Sarmatian tribes. When Georgio Interiano visited them in the middle of the 15th century the Cherkes extended from the Don along the Sea of Azov as far south as Abkhasia, which thus gave them, according to his estimation, a coast line of five hundred miles. Before his time, till driven out by the Tartars, they had settlements in the Crimea. Until recently they peopled the country between Taman and the confines of the Abkhas country, as well as the great and little Kabarda. There is, therefore, considerable ground for assuming that the Sarmatai, including the Sauromatai, Maiotai, and the many other tribes into which they were sub-divided, whom ancient writers aver to have been Caucasians, to have had racial affinity with the Iberians, to have been different from Scythians, in Herodotus' narrow sense of the word, and to have had Amazons among them, are now represented by the Cherkes and Abkhas, or Absne, who occupy, or have occupied, much of the same geographical area, who are Caucasians, who are certainly more nearly related to the Georgians than to any non-Caucasian people, who are anaryan and allophyl as regards Tartars, Mongols, and Finno-ugrians, and who retain the custom of flattening the breasts during maidenhood.^[6]

It now remains to compare what is reported of the Amazons with existing customs of the Cherkas and Abkhas. According to Herodotus, the women of the Sauromatai did not form a distinct nation like the Amazons of the Thermodon, from whom they were imagined to descend. Though they wore the same dress as men, and fought and hunted on horseback, this was not always or necessarily by themselves, for they also did so in company with their husbands. Girls, however, could not marry till they had killed a man in battle, from which custom they received from their Scythian neighbours the epithet of “manslayers”. Hippocrates, discoursing on the Sauromatai, mentions that the women, armed with bow and javelin, fought their enemies on horseback, but only so long as they were in an unmarried state. They might not enter matrimony till they had slain three enemies, and did not live with their husbands till they had offered the sacrifice prescribed by law. After marriage women ceased to ride, save on a special emergency. During infancy mothers cauterised the right breast of their female children, by applying a heated metal instrument made for the purpose. Strabo enters into rather fuller particulars, but refers to tribes dwelling south of the Sauromatai on the counter-forts of the main Chain. From infancy the Amazons had the right breast cauterised to allow of the arm being used with greater ease, especially when throwing the javelin. When at home they ploughed, planted, pastured cattle, and trained horses. The strongest spent much time in hunting on horseback, and in practising warlike exercises. In spring, they passed two months on a neighbouring mountain, the boundary between them and the Gargarenses. The latter also ascended the mountain, in conformity with ancient custom, to perform common sacrifices, and to have intercourse with the women in secret and darkness, for the purpose of obtaining offspring, each man taking the first woman he met. When the women became pregnant they were sent away. The female children were retained by the Amazons, the males were taken by the Gargarenses to be brought up. The children were distributed among families in which the master treated them entirely as his own. This evidently implies a system of fosterage.

Interweaving the substance of the above reports, after making due allowance for the evident tincture of the fabulous they contain, with what is known of existing customs among the Cherkas and Abkhas, a slight summary may be constructed of manners and customs that may, I think, with more or less reason be attributed to the Sarmatians about the sixth century B.C., though, of course, their origin must be much older. It may not be amiss to mention here that rich traces of a very considerable degree of civilisation, to which archaeologists like Virchow and E. Chantre assign a date of about 1000 B.C., but culminating about 700 B.C., have been found in the sepulchres of Koban, near the northern entrance of the Pass of Dariel. Though most of the metallic objects are of bronze, iron was known, and they belong to the early iron period.

The Sarmatians, though without fixed habitations, were possessed of a certain social organisation, being divided, at any rate, into nobles and vassals, many of whom were only slaves. They were also separated into exogamous tribes, for marriage within the tribe was regarded as incest, and punishable with death, perhaps by drowning, as was recently the case. Children of both sexes were not brought up at home, but were transferred to the care of foster-parents, and only returned to the parental hearth when they had attained the age of manhood or womanhood. Though the women were ferocious enough towards tribal enemies their status at home was very low, little better than that of a slave, at any rate after marriage. All outdoor labour, such as ploughing and reaping, tending sheep, cattle, and horses, was performed entirely by them, and in defence of their charge, when attacked, they fought as savagely as the men. Unmarried women—for the care of herding fell chiefly on them—dressed like men, and by reason of their duties were armed with bows and javelins. Perhaps the belief that a woman could not bear courageous children, and was unworthy of becoming a mother, unless she

herself had given proof of her own courage by slaying at least one tribal enemy, gave rise to the usage that a girl might not marry till she had killed one, perhaps three individuals. And reciprocally it is far from improbable that among a race of warriors a man might not take a wife till he had shown his bravery in battle by bringing home at least one head. The whole duty of man lay in fighting, robbing, avenging the death of relatives, man stealing, and, for those that lived on the coast, in piracy. Still, the wild, untutored instinct that glorified acts like these was tempered by a sentiment that made a virtue of generosity and hospitality on the part of the nobles, and demanded respect towards old age from all ranks of society. Largely on account of their vocations, but partly from a superstitious dislike of the men, with their manly instincts, to be seen much in company with women, the sexes lived on the whole rather separate lives, and intercourse between married couples was of a clandestine nature. At certain annual festivals in honour of some divinity celebrated in sacred groves, where sacrifice was made, accompanied by games and athletic sports, promiscuous intercourse was carried on after dark. It may be the worship in spring of certain deities demanded it as a necessary rite. To obtain a wife a man had to pay a price for her in sheep, cattle, horses, or other valuables. But concurrent with this usage women were sometimes carried off, and sometimes they simply consented to live with a man, without further ceremony, though unions of this nature were chiefly prevalent in the lowest class. After marriage a woman lost much of her maidenly freedom, no longer roved after her flocks and herds in society with other girls, but had to follow her husband for the purpose of performing the necessary menial duties he would have disdained to do for himself. At an early age, perhaps between the ages of seven and ten as nowadays, mothers began to flatten the breasts of their female children by compressing them with a broad leather belt or corset, which was sewn round the chest, and was only cut open by the bridegroom on the wedding day by means of a dagger. Such at least is the modern practice.

In the above reconstruction of facts stated or hinted by Greek writers I have suggested how it happened that the Amazons were thought to be almost a race by themselves. It arose in a great measure from their occupation. It was women's work to pasture the flocks and herds, and therefore to defend them if attacked. To do this they must be armed. It need not be supposed that the men never protected the herds themselves. They probably did so when actual danger was anticipated, but under ordinary circumstances it was left to the unmarried women to shield the sheep and cattle from the assaults of casual marauders. That cauterisation of the right breast was ever practised in the Caucasus seems to me highly improbable, though it may have been done elsewhere. Some writers, Professor Sayce among them, maintain that the Amazons that overran Asia Minor, and left traces of themselves at Ephesus, Smyrna, Cyme, and other places were priestesses of the Great Goddess. And it is conceivable these may have sacrificed their right breasts to her by searing them with a hot iron in such a way as to destroy their development. Even Greek and Latin writers were sceptical on this point, and the reason alleged for the custom, to allow greater freedom in casting a javelin or drawing a bow, seems unnecessary from a physiological point of view. Yet, undoubtedly, some operation was performed, or the Grek legend would have had no foundation. If the reason for flattening the breasts about to be proposed is the true one, there is nothing improbable in believing that the existing custom has a long row of centuries behind it, quite enough to throw it back in time beyond the sixth century B.C.

The great desire of women, more especially during a period of warlike barbarism, is to bear male children. Turning our attention to the result of flattening a girl's breasts and letting her wear male attire, it is obvious that a sex distinction has been obliterated, and she has become externally assimilated to a male youth. Moreover, the object has evidently been intentional. It would be no outrage to the reasoning powers of the Sarmatians to suppose that they believed a woman's chances of bearing male children were vastly enhanced by her wearing a man's

dress, and by being conformed in some degree to the male type by forcible compression of the breasts during maidenhood. They would argue thus: a woman wants to bear male children, therefore she ought to be made as much like a man as possible. A conviction of this kind is gained by a process identical with the immature reasoning that underlies what is called sympathetic magic. Here a postulant by a symbolical act expresses the longings of his heart in the mute language of signs, under the vague hope that his wish will be granted either by the spirit or deity in whose power it lies to bestow such a desire, or by virtue of an irresistible necessity, the exact nature of which he cannot fathom, but in which he has, nevertheless, the profoundest belief. In applying this statement to the reasoning of the Sarmatians there seems to be a hiatus. For how is a spirit or an all-compelling necessity to understand what a girl means by dressing like a man and repressing the growth of the breasts? That every Amazon was expected to marry and bear children, and had herself the wish to do so, was regarded as so natural as to be implicit, and to be understood by anybody. All she had to do, therefore, to be fully comprehended by the powers that grant such desires was to hoist, as it were, a signal to indicate the sex of the child she desired to conceive, and this she did naturally enough by donning male attire and exhibiting her flattened bosom. It may be asked why this was done only in maidenhood, and not during the married state, when it would seem more appropriate? It is obvious repression of the breasts could not be maintained when a woman became a mother, and for all we know she may have continued to wear men's clothing all her life; but the act was performed before marriage to ensure the first child being, if possible, a boy. A similar explanation would account for the false beards worn by Argive brides when they slept with their husbands,^[7] and for the widespread custom, alluded to by Mr. J. G. Frazer^[8] of men dressing as women and women as men at marriage, if it could be assumed that the older custom was for women alone to dress in that way, and when the meaning of the ceremony was forgotten that bridegrooms also dressed like women; a change which might arise from a growing spirit of buffoonery and frolic such as is never absent from rustic weddings.

1. According to Klaproth, this custom is confined to the Osetan nobility, and it, together with the dress and other fashions, seems to have been adopted from the dominant Adighé race. The Ossets are a comparatively small, not very important people, located in nearly equal numbers on both sides of the Great Chain. Nothing is known for certain when this Aryan-speaking population entered the Caucasus. To judge from various peculiarities in their language, it is probable that they migrated from the south-east, and that their earliest settlements were on the south side of the mountains.

2. Perhaps the Galgai, a Chechents tribe on the northern slope of the main Chain and the Lesgians, in Georgian Leki.

3. A tributary of the Terek still bears the name of Mermedik.

4. According to Strabo, they nomadised along the Akhardeus, which had its source in the Caucasus and emptied into the Sea of Azov.

5. Bekmursin Nogmow, *Sagen u. Lieder des Tscherkessen Volks*, p.8.

6. This proposed identification of the Sarmatai with Caucasian races runs counter to the general opinion that they were an Aryan-speaking people now represented by some of the Slav nationalities. For undoubtedly in later times Roman writers apply the term Sarmatian to tribes dwelling as far west as the Dniester and the Vistula; but this may be explained. They were dubbed Sarmatians from possessing certain test customs and from living in Sarmatia, a geographical expression of elastic nature which gradually expanded from a small area north of the Caucasus till it covered the whole of Eastern Europe; just as Siberia, which once meant a small territory east of the Ural Mountains, now serves to designate the whole of Northern Asia, and includes several distinct races, each of which may loosely be spoken of as Siberian.

7. J. G. Frazer, *Totemism*, p. 79.

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