**‘Truth behind the myths’: Amazon warrior women of Greek legend may really have existed**

**Excavations** of **bronze age graves** have found **battle-scarred female archers**, says the historian Bettany Hughes

**I**n Greek legends, the Amazons were **feared and formidable women warriors** who lived on the edge of the known world. Hercules had to obtain the **magic girdle** of the Amazonian queen Hippolyte in one of **his 12 labours**, and Achilles killed another queen, Penthesilea, **only to fall in love with her as her beautiful face emerged from her helmet**. **These horseback-riding, bow-wielding nomads**, who fought and hunted just like men, have long been **shrouded** in myth, but **archaeologists** are discovering increasing evidence that they really did exist.

**Excavations** of graves within **a bronze age necropolis** in Nakhchivan in [Azerbaijan](https://www.theguardian.com/world/azerbaijan) revealed that women had been buried with weapons such as **razor-sharp arrowheads**, a bronze **dagger** and a **mace**, as well as **jewellery**.

Archaeologists have concluded that they could have been Amazon women who lived 4,000 years ago. These fearsome women were famed for their **male-free society** and their **prowess** on the **battlefield**, particularly with a bow and arrow.

She said this evidence was all the more significant when linked to earlier finds. In 2019, the remains of four female warriors buried with **arrowheads** and **spears** were found in Russia and, in 2017, **Armenian archaeologists unearthed** the remains of a woman who appeared to have died from battle injuries, as an arrowhead was buried in her leg. In the early 1990s, the remains of a woman buried with a dagger were found near the Kazakhstan border.

Hughes said: “A **civilisation** isn’t made up of a single grave. If we’re talking about a culture that crosses the Caucasus and the **Steppe**, which is what all the ancients said, obviously you need other remains.”

Some of the **skeletons** reveal that the women had used **bows** and **arrows** **extensively**, Hughes observed: “Their fingers are **warped** because they’re using arrows so much. Changes on the **finger joints** wouldn’t just happen from hunting. That is some sustained, big practice. What’s very exciting is that a lot of the bone evidence is also showing clear evidence of sustained time **in the saddle**. Women’s **pelvises** are basically opened up because they’re riding horses. [Their] bones are just shaped by their lifestyle.”

She noted that the jewellery includes **carnelian necklaces**: “Carnelian is **a semi-precious stone**. You see it often when people are high **priestesses** or **goddesses**. So it’s a mark of women with status – as are **mace heads**.”

The finds will be revealed in a new Channel 4 series in April, titled Bettany Hughes’ Treasures of the World. One of the episodes, **“Silk Roads and the Caucasus”, focuses on a part of the world that witnessed the ebb and flow of cultures and civilisations for centuries and where trade routes joined the continents of Asia and Europe**.

In the documentary, she says of the Amazon finds: “Slowly you’re getting these **brilliant bits** of evidence that are **coming out of** the earth. **That’s often the way, with the really best stories**.”

She visits the mountain village of Khinalig in [the Greater Caucasus](https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/gallery/2017/mar/03/tusheti-people-georgia-in-pictures), the highest inhabited place in Europe. **It is so remote that it “feels as though it’s lost in time”, she says, noting that its local language is not spoken anywhere else.**

There has been a settlement there since the bronze age, and some of its 2,000 residents tell her that, in ancient times, **their women disguised themselves as men with scarves – stories handed down through their generations**.