

## The Role of Women in Military Organization of Nomads

Gaukhar Z. Balgabayeveva<sup>a</sup>, Sergey V. Samarkin<sup>a</sup>, Elizaveta V. Yarochkina<sup>a</sup>, Aigul B. Taskuzhina<sup>a</sup>, Aigul B. Amantaeva<sup>a</sup> and Svetlana V. Nazarova<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Kostanay State Pedagogical Institute, Kostanay, KAZAKHSTAN

### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine the role of women in the nomadic environment, particularly in the military structure. Using the method of comparative historical analysis as well as archaeological research data, the authors found that dual organization was typical for most nomads. Moreover, women in the Scythian and Sarmatian societies were equal to men in the ability to work and opportunities to lead the tribes and to perform priestly functions. The study also found that women of the steppe could participate in the fateful decisions of their people. Practical significance of this research is determined by the fact that its findings can be used in further studies of women's role in the life organization of the nomads, as well as in the gender equality studies.

### KEYWORDS

Nomads, nomadic social system, Scythians and Sarmatians, gender equality, women in nomadic culture

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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## Introduction

In the nomadic culture gender formation as a socio-cultural and psychosocial role of men and women took place under the great influence of a particular ideological system and traditions (Dyson-Hudson & Dyson-Hudson, 1980; Mishukova, 2012). Thus, one of the prerequisites for social development of nomads in military affairs was involvement of women in war affairs. (Kradin, 2001). It is connected with the legends about the Amazons – warrior women who

**CORRESPONDENCE** Gaukhar Z. Balgabayeveva ✉ [balgabaeva.gauhar@mail.ru](mailto:balgabaeva.gauhar@mail.ru)

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were a separate tribe and were taught from childhood to use a spear, a sword, to throw jerids, and to be skilled riders (Kosven, 1947).

Historians emphasize specific role of women in the Scythian and Sarmatian societies (Zuev, 1996, Kozlovsky, 1996). It is known that women of the steppe differed from women of other Eastern nations by greater independence and freedom; they often participated in taking fateful decisions of their people (Davis-Kimball, 1997). Steppe gave birth to such types of women as women-friends, women-allies, khan's counselors, family governess, wit women, and, finally, women-warriors. At the same time, the nomads did not provide women for entertainment. According to the code of honor, steppe tribeswomen could only become wives in the future (Balonov, 1996).

As a result, the image of women in nomadic environments is presented and expressed through the prism of natural and divine nature; it is firmly based on the laws of the original mother-legal status and is a base for the development of paternal-legal relations (Pushkareva, 1998).

### ***Background Paper***

Customs of gender equality among the nomads, particularly among Sarmatians were studied by Herodotus (2002). Sarmatian woman retained their ancient customs: along with their husbands, and even without them, they sat on horseback going to hunting, wore the same clothes made for men. The girl could not marry before killing the enemy, so some women died old and unmarried. As pointed out by the ancient Greek historian, Sarmatians originated from the Amazon – Scythian combination. At the same time, the Scythians "tamed" the Amazons so that they did not engage in robbery: they sent young Scythian youths to them. However, they did not stay with the young Scythian men, because they could not live like the Scythian women, who performed women's work, remained in their carts, did not go hunting and did not go anywhere at all. Therefore, Scythian young men took their share of inheritance and went with the Amazons of the river Tanais.

It should be noted that the place of women in the military structure of the nomads was defined in the Kazakh epos. There, a woman was appreciated, along with a horse and a weapon. Moreover, it was personified as a batyr's mind, his intellectual resourcefulness, while the batyr was portrayed as an innocent brawler, who needed guidance and support. Nevertheless, anyway, the woman was always with her man in the Steppe (Levshin, 1996).

According to V.Y. Zuev (1996), among the ancient Turks not only kagan, but also his wife had the right to supreme power. It also led to sacralization of their families – the Kagan and the Katun. In this respect, one can see a relic of parent rights, which was particularly strong in the ancient and medieval society.

In this regard, it is interesting to cite N. Ospanula (1999) regarding the Turkish goddess of childbirth and fertility: "Umay does not represent the feminine in the male-female opposition. This opposition does not exist in the Turkic metaphysical system, which is thoroughly realistic and functional, phenomenological. Heidegger's "poetic living man on earth" was said as if about the Turkish spirit. Umai has many functions according to how diverse human life is, but it protects the basis of genealogical, anthropological identity of the Turks".

The Mongolian woman papal ambassador P. Carpini (1957), first visited the land of the Mongols in the 13th century and wrote the following: "It is very difficult to distinguish men from women due to the fact that they are dressed the same way: all wear robes, lined with fur, and high hats made of canvas or silk, flared up. "

Many scientists also point out that in the nomadic tradition women were considered equal to men in all: in power and in the ability to work (Andreski, 1968; Lomsky-Feder & Sasson-Levy, 2016; Davis-Kimball, 1997). Thus, the nomadic way of life does not divide people into men and women, it sets similar requirements, and they try to meet them, as if even competing with each other (Levshin, 1996). Sarmatian women could lead the tribes and performed priestly functions. Scientists believe that Sarmatian family was maternal and the bloodlines at the stage of tribal system's decomposition were considered with regard to the female line. Later, maternity signs disappeared along with the creation of new Sarmatian alliances (Dumanov, 2000).

According to nomadology by G. Deleuze & F. Guattari (2007), nomads presented a numerological system, where a person became the number essence, or a part of numerical composition of people and troops, as nomads were considered the inventors of a war machine as opposed to the State-Civilization. They did not share space as citizens; they were split in space, first, as family units and then – as military formations, such as hundreds and tens of thousands. Therefore, in a nomadic society, both men and women were part of the war machine, where they were opposed to all strangers as potential enemies. Hence, researchers noted that order and discipline was inherent in their families.

The book by L.N. Gumilyov "Ancient Turks" (1997) contain interesting facts about the role of women in the nomadic society. With regard to the substantial historical material, this researcher showed many legendary women in history, who participated in the battles, led the villages, educated famous personalities. According to the scientist, restriction of women's rights in the nomadic world became a phenomenon much later, and perhaps was associated with the general decline of Central Asia in the post-Mongol period.

While some anthropologists considered the existence of truly equal societies in the past (Batchaev, 1985; Makhortykh, 1994), and the Western experts agree that there are societies in which women have achieved huge social recognition and power (Lomsky-Feder & Sasson-Levy, 2016; Andreski, 1968), still women almost everywhere were excluded from certain important economic or social activities; their social roles as mothers and wives were associated with a smaller set of powers and prerogatives than men's social roles of fathers and brothers. Thus, one can state that the gender asymmetry is a universal phenomenon of the human social life.

### ***Research Purpose***

The purpose of this study is to determine the role of women in the military structure of the nomads by studying scientific literature and folklore.

### ***Research questions***



What was the role of women in the Scythian and Sarmatian societies? Does this affect the development of gender stereotypes causing shift in social foundations of nomadic states?

### **Method**

The author used theoretical research methods: comparative historical analysis and extrapolation. The paper was also based on theoretical findings provided by E.P. Bunatyan (1985), who described social reconstruction methods used in archeology.

### **Data, Analysis, and Results**

Traditions of maternal law determined social bases of many nomadic states. Mythological consciousness keeps the ideas about the moon\female and solar\masculine essence of the ruling dynasties, Katun and Kagan families or tribes, deities liken Tengri and yduk Yer-Sub serve as creators of macro and microcosm of the Turks, Hsiung-nu was sacrificed to the Sun and to the Moon (Gulyaev, 1995).

Written sources indicate the existence of the dual-organized ruling tribes in a number of nomadic and sedentary peoples of antiquity and the early Middle Ages. Dual organization is of particular importance when it came to ruling tribes, the rights and duties in marriage and family relations were forcefully established. In the Hsiung-nu Empire, marriage existed between the noble and originally families – Huyan and Shanyu (Iyuan and Duge). The Kagan Ashina and the Katun Ashina were the ruling dynasty in the Second East Turkic Kaganate, formed the consolidating core of the Turkic world. Compliance with the order of succession, which takes into account the interests of the two tribes, was the main point in relations between the parties of the dual-organized ruling coalition. Failure to comply with maternal inheritance or Katun (the Empress) caused exclusion of Kagan sons, stepsons from the indigenous yurt, internecine political struggle and state failure (Miroshina, 1990).

Considering the Scythian-Saka era, Tabitha was regarded as goddess of the hearth, the patron of fire. The Kazakh language has the idiom "ottyn taby", which means "the flame of fire." The Scythian art depicted Tabitha in saukele and with a mirror in her hand. Herodotus identified her with the Greek Hestia. As regards the latter, Hestia was the ancient Greek goddess of the hearth, the Olympian deity. She was the patron of unquenchable fire - starters, combining the world of gods, human society and each family. The chaste celibate Hestia (she was one of the few who was not under the influence of Aphrodite's power) is in full rest in Olympus, symbolizing the inviolable space. In the Roman tradition, it corresponded to Vesta. The cult of Vesta, which goes back to the most ancient Indo-European tradition, one of the native Roman traditions, was closely associated with the shrines of the city: palladium brought by Aeneas and stored in the temple of Vesta as a guarantee of the Roman power, and regia – the king's housing. In Tabitha, one can see taming of the fire, its cultivation and domestication. Perhaps, special role of women in the Scythian society was associated with extreme Tabitha's role in the Scythian pantheon. Ares was the god of war, the god of killing. This was the Dionysian god of destruction and ecstasy. Thus, it is possible to observe an interesting inversion. In the Greek tradition, women were companions of Dionysus, however, in the Scythian

tradition women were representatives of the Apollonian, positive beginning. Perhaps that was the main distinguishing feature of women in a nomadic society. Women did not distinguish themselves from existence as something special, they were always with their husbands, children and relatives. In contrast to men that were prone to abstraction, women did not doubt their identity: she was created for childbirth and for lifetime existence with her child (Herodotus, 2002).

The earliest burials of women-warriors were discovered in the lower reaches of Syr Darya; they refer to the VIII-VII centuries BC. Later, similar burials were recorded in the habitat of Sarmatian tribes - in the Lower Volga, North Caucasus, Southern Urals and in Central Kazakhstan (the second half of the VII century BC). By VI century BC, the area of "Amazon" burials covered the entire settlement area of Scythian-Saka peoples, including the steppes of Eastern Europe (Miroshina, 1990). In any case, written and archaeological materials suggest a substantial layer of warriors (Gulyaev, 1995). For example, in a sample of female Scythian burial of IV-III centuries found in the steppe Dnieper, weapons in the accompanying inventory were noted in 30 cases out of 103 (29%) (Bunatian, 1985). Considering only the North Caucasus, and earlier, a trace of "Amazons" could be found as well. Among the Nartan burials, one can distinguish burial mound No. 5, with the "amazon" (Batchaev, 1985). Under the influence of nomadic tribes, women-warriors appeared among the population of the North Caucasus. Thus, one of stone boxes of Kamennomostsky burial in Kabardino-Balkaria dated VII-VI century BC, contained a middle-aged woman with various supplies, including weapons. Women burials with arms were discovered by L.K. Galanina in Kelernese. Some of these burials, as well as the female burial of Habadinskiy burial dated VI-V centuries BC in Dagestan, were accompanied by horse burials (Makhortykh, 1994).

Materials taken from cemeteries of the Middle Don confirm the important role of women in the military structure of the steppe. As an example, one can note the burial mound Durovka 16, which belonged to a woman of 30-35 years; analysis of the skeletal remains, "gives reason to believe that she was a rider (Amazon)" (Kozlovskaya, 1996). The burial mound No. 6 contained remains of a young woman aged 20-25, the accompanying inventory contained horse remains. The investigated mounds in 3 out of 4 cases contained young women from rather wealthy families, and in two cases – armed women. The presence of expensive jewelry from Bosphorus, Greek amphora with oil or wine, great size and splendor of the funerary structures were "comparable to the already known mounds of the military aristocracy." Referring to this fact, V.I. Gulyaev and E.I. Savchenko (1995) paid attention to another fact. In 1991, archaeologists found 112 "Amazon" graves in Scythian burial mounds (dated mainly the second half of the V - end of IV century BC.) only between the Don and the Dnieper; this number significantly exceeds the number of female graves with weapons in Sarmatians who lived in the Volga and Ural regions; these regions were traditionally considered as "Amazon". In cases when it was possible to determine the age, it became clear that most armed Scythian women aged between 16 and 30 years (69% of the total number of graves). Many burials of young women with guns belonged to the upper strata of the Scythian society. V.I. Gulyaev and E.I. Savchenko suggested the existence of "a kind of conscription in the form of lightly armed auxiliary units for specific age and social groups of the Scythian women."



V.Y. Zuev (1996) considered the opinion regarding the "Sarmatian priestesses" as a "scientific myth". The earliest burials of the "Amazons" were discovered in the necropolis of the Syr Darya Basin (Uigarak, Tagisken) dated VIII-VII centuries BC. In the second half of VII century BC, similar burials appeared in the North Caucasus (Kelermes, Nartan) and in the Lower Volga region, and in the east - in the southern Urals and in Central Kazakhstan. Later, these burials appeared in other places, and in the VI century BC, their distribution area reached its climax, and covered most of settlement areas of nomads of the Eurasian steppes, the Don and the North Caucasus (Zuev, 1996).

As regards social status of the "Scythian Amazons", in most cases it was quite high. In this respect, F.R. Balonov (1996) noted: "At the time of the Scythian epoch, burial carts are mainly associated with buried women (70%), who had a special social status."

Another archaeological confirmation of the existence of such cultures was the discovery of a large burial in Pokrovka in the mid-1990s referring to approximately 600 BC. That burial contained three groups of women: warriors buried with weapons in their hands, or with a horse, priestesses buried with iconic characters, and just richly decorated women. Nearby, specialists found the burial of men with children in their arms, which was not typical for women's graves. These archaeological discoveries revived the myth of the Amazons (Davis-Kimball, 1997).

## Discussion and Conclusion

Arguments in favor of the existing matriarchy were based on several kinds of evidence: evidence of modern societies, in which women provided livelihood (Pushkareva, 1998); data referring to societies with a matrilineal inheritance system (Mishukova 2012); archaeological data providing interpretation of the existence of female deities - the heads of the pantheon, queens, headed by the tribes and nations, killings of boys at birth, etc. (Bunatyan, 1985).

Reconstruction of the matriarchal stage at the initial stage of primitive society is based, as a rule, not only on ethnological data, rather on data provided by ancient and medieval authors regarding any exotic orders "taken out" of the general system of social life. These data can be divided into 3 groups. The first indicates the news regarding matrilineal character of social life for example, facts provided by Herodotus regarding Lycians (Herodotus, 2002). The second - reports of equitable, dignified, even honorable women. They also do not prove the existence of matriarchy as the domination of women. Third - direct facts indicating that men were governed by women, for example, Skilaka about Sarmatians, Pliny about the Indian pandas. They can be quite reliable, but present evidence of matriarchy similar to the facts regarding the empresses' rule in Russia or about queens in Western Europe. However, modern anthropological evidence suggests male dominance in most societies (Pushkareva, 1998).

The author noted that in the nomadic tradition women were considered to be equal to men in all - in the power and in the ability to work in this regard. Thus, A.I. Levshin (1996) notes, "Women of the Cossack people for many reasons should be preferred in contrast to men. Kirghiz women are far more superior to the Kirghiz men in terms of hard work. They control the entire household, they care of the cattle, they, moreover, do needlework and cooking, they make clothes for themselves and for their children, they also have to take care of everything

required by their husbands, sometimes they even saddle up their horses and put them on horseback. For all these works women were awarded with slavery their husbands are their owners or masters".

With regard to gender differences, P. Carpini (1957) describes them almost in the same terms as A.I. Levshin (1996), but with a more respectful attitude towards the phenomenon itself: "Men do not exert themselves to housework: hunting, shooting, shepherding and riding make all their responsibilities. Girls and women also have agility and courage. They are required to fabricate fur, to make clothes, and to look after the cattle. The more women in each house, the more successful is housework. Due to the custom of polygamy, Tatars buy wives as many as each of them is able to feed". Then he again emphasizes the absence of external differences in lifestyle and women's performance, which is no worse than that of men: "Girls and women deftly ride on horseback, like men. We also saw how they carried bows and quivers. In addition, both men and women can ride long and hard. Their stirrups are very short, they cherish horses very much, moreover, they carefully watch over the entire property. Their wives make everything: coats, dresses, shoes, boots and all leather goods, they also drive carts and repair them; they load up camels and they are very agile and swift in every business".

The author of this study believes that this presents a rather superficial image of Kazakh women. This is a view of an observer, who does not want to delve into the nomadic "order of things. The nomadic lifestyle implied that men acted as breadwinners, warriors and as protectors of tribes. Therefore, men had to be absent all the time exploring new pastures, stealing other people's horses, fulfilling patrol duties, grazing cattle. A woman was always at home, under nomadic life she lived as a mobile home, a symbol of the family, and she did all that out of necessity. Women in Turkic society traditionally occupied a high position in comparison with the neighboring nations (Pushkareva, 1998, Gumilev, 1997). Because sex does not give any privileges or benefits to anyone. Otherwise, it would upset the delicate ecosystem of the nomadic community, where each active unit counts. As evidenced by historical sources (Davis-Kimball, 1997; Lomsky-Feder & Sasson-Levy, 2016), nomadic women differed little from men, even by appearance.

However, one has to admit relevance of the question whether we are dealing with a matriarchal relic or the relatively high status of women in the military is a different phenomenon. It is well known that the theory of matriarchy appeared in line with the natural science evolution in the middle of the XIX century, in opposition to the patriarchal social structure theory, dominant in European science and philosophy since the time of Plato and Aristotle (Dumanov, 2000). Thus, L.H. Morgan (1907), relying mainly on ethnological data, put forward the thesis of a collective form of organization as a kind of primitive society and as maternal principle at the pre-patriarchal stage.

As we see, the role of women in the military and political activities of nomadic association is not a "relic" of matriarchal relations; it presents a completely new phenomenon, caused by the increase in the social importance of women in the life support system of a nomadic society. According to archaeological data, women had a special status in the priestly caste; priestly functions implied "androgyny" of their executors. This was clearly displayed by the materials of the Scythian society where priests were effeminate in



appearance and clothing and by the materials of the Sarmatian society where women were endowed with the attributes of masculinity priestess - daggers - akinaks and swords.

It should be emphasized that all representatives of nomadic herders participated in the nomadic life, were able to lead a nomadic life and were able to convert the peace skills into the warfare skills. Every nomad, having a horse, was a potential soldier; this rule was sometimes extended to women. At the same time, only a small proportion of the settled population is engaged in military affairs.

Therefore, one can conclude that nomadic culture was characterized by a particularly respectful attitude towards women, and maternal traditions determined social foundations of many nomadic nations of the world.

### Implications and Recommendations

The author considered different concepts that explain features of the socio-cultural and psychosocial role of women in the nomadic culture. Thus, research results may be useful in studying the question of women's role in the organization of nomadic life. This study also raised the issue of gender asymmetry, which is relevant to modern society, and therefore requires further study.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

### Notes on contributors

**Gaukhar Z. Balgabayeva** holds a PhD, Associate Professor of Development of History of Kazakhstan Department, Kostanay State Pedagogical Institute, Kostanay, Kazakhstan.

**Sergey V. Samarkin** holds a PhD at Development of World History and Social Sciences Department, Kostanay State Pedagogical Institute, Kostanay, Kazakhstan.

**Elizaveta V. Yarochkina** holds a PhD, Associate Professor of Development of World History and Social Sciences Department, Kostanay State Pedagogical Institute, Kostanay, Kazakhstan.

**Aigul B. Taskuzhina** holds a PhD at Development of History of Kazakhstan Department, Kostanay State Pedagogical Institute, Kostanay, Kazakhstan;

**Aigul B. Amantaeva** holds a PhD at Development of World History and Social Sciences Department, Kostanay State Pedagogical Institute, Kostanay, Kazakhstan.

**Svetlana V. Nazarova** holds a PhD at Development of World History and Social Sciences Department, Kostanay State Pedagogical Institute, Kostanay, Kazakhstan.

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