An Archaeological Analysis of Gender Roles in Ancient Nonliterate Cultures of Eurasia

Mike Adamson B.A.(Hons)
The opened burial of a Sarmatian warrior-priestess at Pokrovka, just to the north of the Caspian Sea. The unambiguous evidence of the burial of women with cultic, warrior and high-status goods amongst the steppe cultures, exposed during the 1990s, has provided the material basis for challenging long-held assumptions concerning the universality of the gender norms with which our culture is familiar.

Photograph courtesy Jeannine Davis-Kimball, CSEN, Berkeley, California.
Limited Copyright Waiver

The Director of Administration and Registrar
Flinders University
GPO Box 210
ADELAIDE SA 5001

MASTERS THESIS

I hereby waive the following restrictions:

(a) for three years after the deposit of the thesis, readers other than academic staff and students of the University must obtain the consent of the Author or the Head of the Discipline or the Librarian before consulting a thesis;

(b) for three years after the deposit of the thesis, no copy may be made of the thesis or part of it without prior consent of the author.

NAME: ..........................................................................

SIGNATURE: ..........................................................................

Date: ..........................................................................

II
Declaration

The Director of Administration and Registrar
Flinders University
GPO Box 210
ADELAIDE SA 5001

MASTERS THESIS

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

NAME: ...........................................................................

SIGNATURE: .................................................................

Date: ............................................................................
Acknowledgments

The writer would like to acknowledge the generous assistance received from the following parties in preparation of this study, in particular those who discussed their work and offered personal comments to clarify various points.

**Margaret Cox, Bournemouth University**
for her illuminating comments on sexing methodology and the limitations thereof.

**Jeannine Davis-Kimball, CSEN, Berkeley**
whose generous assistance solved many a riddle.

**Bonnie Effros, Southern Illinois University**
for helping bring into focus the modern environment of the gender-bias debate.

**J. V. S. Megaw (retired)**
whose always pithy commentary helped keep the mantle of sanity on a debate that could easily have gone out of control.

**Eileen Murphy, Queens University, Belfast**
for her frank and clear guidance on the hard science supporting the conclusions.

**Sandra Olsen, Carnegie Museum**
whose comments on the 2000 conference on human/equine interactions in Central Asia were most helpful.

**Donald Pate, Flinders University of South Australia**
whose careful consideration of the material and always-helpful suggestions moved the project along smartly.

**Gerhard Poellaur, Austria**
for his clarifications concerning the Dodonna bronze.
# An Archaeological Analysis of Gender Roles in Ancient Non-Literate Cultures of Eurasia

Mike Adamson BA (Hons)

**Contents:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>IV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contents</td>
<td>V – VI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lists of Maps and Tables</td>
<td>VII</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lists of Plates</td>
<td>VIII – IX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Chapter 1: Introduction

- Modes of Sex Analysis: 2
- Bias Factors: 7
- Early Sources: 20

## Chapter 2: Who Were These Peoples?

- Celts: 30
  - A Note on Current Controversy: 30
  - The Standard Model: 33
  - An Archaeological Perspective: 39
- Scythians: 41
- Sauro-Sarmatians: 50
- Saka: 53
- Altai Tribes: 56
- Far Eastern Horse Tribes: 58
- The Direct Historical Approach: A Flawed Tool?: 59
- Target Cultures: Discussion: 60

## Chapter 3: Ancient Evidence

- Celts: 68
- Celtic Artworks: 71
- Herodotus: Histories: 75
- Scythia: 77
- Scythian Artworks: 80
- Tacitus: The Germania: 83
- Egypt: 89
- Arrian: The Campaigns of Alexander: 90
- The Legacy of Myth: 92
List of Maps

Map 1: *Iron Age Europe and the Expansion of the “Celtic” Peoples* 31
From: Megaw & Megaw (1989), reproduced in *The Celtic World*,
Miranda J. Green (ed), 1995 Routledge, London pXXIV

Map 2: *Iron Age Eurasia and the Territories of the Steppe Peoples* 42
Reproduced courtesy Jeannine Davis-Kimball, CSEN, Berkeley, California

Map 3: *Vix Locality Map* 114
Thames and Hudson, p21

List of Tables

Table 4.1: *Classic Traits of the Male versus Female Pelvis* 103
Allyn and Bacon, Boston, MA.

Table 4.2: *Characteristics of Male and Female Skulls* 106
Allyn and Bacon, Boston, MA.
List of Plates

Frontispiece: 1

Sarmatian grave at Pokrovka; photo courtesy CSEN, Berkeley, California.

Plate 1: 73

VOTIVE OFFERING FROM THE SEINE

FROM The Celtic World, Miranda J. Green (ed), (1995)

Plate 2: 85

THE “WINDEBY GIRL”

FROM Celts: Europe’s People of Iron, (1994)
Time-Life, Alexandria, Virginia, p152.

Plate 3: 94

THE DODONA “YOUTH”


Plate 4: 104

COMPARITITIVE STRUCTURE OF MALE AND FEMALE PELVES

FROM Byers, S. N. (2002) Introduction to Forensic Anthropology,
Allyn and Bacon, Boston, Massachusetts, p174.

Plate 5: 107

COMPARITITIVE STRUCTURE OF MALE AND FEMALE SKULLS

FROM Byers, S. N. (2002) Introduction to Forensic Anthropology,
Allyn and Bacon, Boston, Massachusetts, p180.
Plate 6: 115

THE VIX “PRINCESS”

FROM CELTS: EUROPE’S PEOPLE OF IRON, (1994)
TIME-LIFE, ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA, p48.

Plate 7: 141

SEXUAL DIVISION OF LABOUR

TOP: FROM TRIPPETT, F. (1975) THE FIRST HORSEMEN,
TIME-LIFE BOOK, NED. p149.

BOTTOM: FROM BINFORD, L. (1983) IN PURSUIT OF THE PAST,
THAMES AND HUDSON, LONDON, p223.

Plate 8: 154

RECONSTRUCTED CELTIC CHARIOT

TIME-LIFE BOOKS, ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA, p57.

Plate 9: 164

DETAIL FROM THE CHERTOMLYK AMPHORA

FROM TRIPPETT, F (1975) THE FIRST HORSEMEN
TIME-LIFE BOOKS, NED. p149.
An Archaeological Analysis of Gender Roles in Ancient Non-Literate Cultures of Eurasia

ABSTRACT

Ascription of sex to inhumed remains on the principle basis of grave-goods, as distinct from anthropometric data, can be a vague process due to incipient gender bias in interpretation. Cross-matching of athropometrics with gravegoods can sometimes generate results that appear ambiguous or paradoxical as they may not accord with preconceived relationships between gender roles and sex. This reduces confidence in the demography of various archaeologically-revealed cultures, especially those of Iron Age Europe, which were erected on the basis of what we may now see as potentially flawed analysis.

Comparative and contrasting analyses are made of contemporary and related cultures to investigate gender role assumptions on a wide basis. Regarding nonliterate cultures, archaeologists have limited means to interpret the relationships between sex and gender-roles, and these methods are explored.

The traditional outlook is assessed for functional bias in light of its origins and perpetuation, and a new synthesis is proposed for ongoing analysis. This synthesis includes strict application of refined anthropometric methodology and the resolution of paradox by adoption of a revised underlying hypothesis.

A correlation is observed between use of the horse and a significant blurring of gender role stereotypes, occurring in nomadic cultures whose legacy persists to the present day. This is examined in light of the proposed new synthesis for a consequential or coincidental relationship, the former being apparent.

It is found that gender role bias has played an uncomfortably large part in Iron Age scholarship, and that outdated socio-cultural assumptions continue to foster an unsupportable view of elements of world history.
Chapter One:

Introduction

In our culture patriarchal values are an historic legacy. When the fields of archeology and anthropology blossomed in the 19th century, neither these values nor their origins were considered subjects for vigorous question, and this has fostered a potentially flawed view of at least some of the past ages as revealed and interpreted by the mores of then-prevailing society. With the changes in social thought during the second half of the 20th century, feminism and Feminist Archeology have become acknowledged fields and have gained credibility with most serious workers, strongly embracing the tenets of the Post-Processualist age, and this automatically widens our perspective on the past.

With a broader pallet of social models with which to interpret archeologically-revealed cultures, significant doubt now surrounds some past assumptions of gender roles and behaviors, and raises the issue of revision. This is potentially contentious, but with a firm grounding in the scientific analysis of the material record and a vigorous Post-Processualist interpretation of the resulting data, an enhanced image of some cultures begins to emerge.

The current study seeks to identify gender-bias in literate cultures describing nonliterate cultures, in texts passed down to the modern age, ranging from the records of Greek and Roman journalists, to late-Victorian and early-Edwardian era scholarship (including inaccurate sex-ascription of exhumed remains as a socially-driven technical phenomenon persisting into the modern era). This is accomplished by the comparison or contrast of ancient texts with archeological material evidence (female burials and accompanying grave goods; and the effects of technology on emergent cultures, such as the apparently key adoption of horseback riding) and, where appropriate, use of current anthropological and other scientific input. The gender bias of these sources is deconstructed
and the historic content reinterpreted in accordance with a revised hypothesis of gender behavior. This applies equally to 20th century archeological investigative methodologies and the assumptions arising from them.

**Modes of Sex Analysis**

When an undisturbed burial is uncovered the potential for fresh discovery is eminent. Reworking by land movement, burrowing animals, the action of water and frost, excavation for various purposes in times subsequent to burial, and the deliberate intervention of grave-robbers or inept prior workers, all disturb or destroy the context of the site (Schiffer, 1987; Fagan, 1994: 88), and the total possible meaningful information is thus eroded. But from time to time, significant, undisturbed burials are found, and work on mortuary sites constitutes one of the major areas of archeology.

A grave, whether a humble scraping in the ground, a lined tumulus chamber, a barrow mound or grand tomb, provides a time capsule that transmits a packet of information from the originating culture down to us, and when that information is received undistorted we have our best image of the era in question. But even when the materials are undisturbed and the investigation is performed to a high standard of competence, the interpretation of the materials poses a renewed potential for distortion, and the reevaluation of past work is critical.

Though there is considerable variability in the state of preservation of inhumed remains, due to the action of natural decomposition under the direct effects of the environment of deposition (e.g., ground water invasion, frost crystallization, mummification due to heat or cold in dry regions, chemical factors inhibiting decomposition,) (Schiffer, 1987; Fagan, 1994: 135-147) in the majority of cases we are left with no more than bones, and skeletons are often incomplete. Soft tissue analysis is rarely possible due to organic
decomposition, and the majority of information is obtained through morphometric and histological investigation of the skeleton.

The sex of an inhumed individual seems ostensibly a straightforward question, but has been a source of controversy, and much has been written on the perception and interpretation of data derived from the skeleton. Sex is only one aspect of a large possible suite of data that can be obtained (Krogman and Iscan, 1986; Larsen, 1987; Iscan and Kennedy, 1989) but can be contentious in its implications and has at times been considered of low priority (Genoves, 1963: 343-352; Buikstra and Ubelaker, 1994; Bass, 1995; White, 2000). Approaches to determining the sex of skeletal remains are twofold:

1) **Physical analysis:** Anthropometric indexes based on known standards are applied to yield a numeric value corresponding to male or female.

   Sex-specific characters of the skeleton are identified, including some 25 characters of the skull, pubis-ischium ratio of the pelvis, relative width of pelvic and pectoral girdles, aspect ratios of the long bones, and other factors (Bass, 1995; Powell, Steele and Collins, 1997: 275; White, 2000). DNA fingerprinting is now playing an increasing role in this analysis (Bass, 1995: 35; Brown, 2000: 455-473; White, 2000). The resulting figures group together in a pattern that favours a male or female consensus. This is a skilled and time-consuming process, but, with various justifications (Härke, 1997: 132-134), not all archeologists choose to obtain these data.

2) **Associative analysis:** the sex of the individual is inferred from the nature of the suite of goods deposited in the grave.

   Grave goods are common throughout the world, and broad-based sociocultural traits can be inferred from them, at community, family and individual levels. Economic, religious,
social and other status categories are considered to be represented, and generally consistent bimodalities within larger overall populations are believed to indicate sexual dimorphism in the normative practices of the represented cultures.

The latter method seems, at first glance, to carry a dangerous loading of subjectivity (Cohen and Bennett, 1993; Hays-Gilpin and Whitley, 1998: 4), but the model evolved to cater to the many instances in which the osteology is imperfectly preserved and too little remains to make a firm determination by available morphometric means. However, grave goods will only provide a reliable indicator when there are discrete associations of material culture and gender roles. Gilchrist (1991: 497) defined matters thus: “Gender centres on the social construction of masculinity and femininity: the social values invested in the sexual differences between men and women.” But the ambiguity in this across cultures and time invalidates past notions of universality. Reassessment of past research involving mortuary investigations have shown that sex determinations made on the basis of perceived vs. material culture/gender associations, and/or gross skeletal morphology, can be woefully inadequate, with highly dubious results.

For instance, Bonnie Effros (2000) of Southern Illinois University, reassessed work done in 1947 on a 7thc AD Frankish cemetery from Ennery in Moselle, which had been sexed largely on the basis of the bimodal grave good suite. Only skeletons accompanied by grave goods were also investigated anthropometrically (presumably so the methods could be cross-referenced). The anthropometric investigation however employed the vague technique of ascribing sex on overall height, which obviously supports gross trends only, as tall women and short men are automatically invisible. This approach also left a large part of the material beyond diagnosis, as a) not all skeletons were accompanied by grave goods, and b) not all skeletons were complete enough to achieve any reliable estimate of their height in life. The sex demographic of this population was reduced to an educated guess at best, and it cannot be
reassessed with modern techniques because the materials deteriorated rapidly and were not kept (Effros, pers. comm.). This was common in the Cultural-Historical era (Shafer, 1997: 14), when only “representative samples” were retained, prior to the recognition of the importance of statistical sampling in archaeology. We often get only one opportunity to work the materials, and this is the kind of problem that destroys context and eliminates further interpretation.

Awareness of this problem is nothing new, however. Genoves (1963: 343) opened his discussion of the sexing methodology of the period thus: “Often a major study of skeletal remains is made with practically no more than a cursory investigation of sexual differences, and much laborious and useful work is undertaken … which would lose almost all its usefulness if the sex assignment proved to be incorrect.” It becomes increasingly clear that this procedural deficiency is very real and begs the question as to just how widespread the failure might be, especially amongst older materials, collected in the 19th century and which may not yet have been subjected to modern anthropometric analysis, but which nonetheless may be contributory to early and persistent models for gender roles in ancient societies.

For instance, when James Doran developed a computer model for automatic hypothesis generation he used the data pertaining to the mortuary complex at Munsingen-Rain, outside Bern, from the Swiss La Tene: “This cemetery was excavated early in the [previous] century, but has been published in full detail only recently… It is of great importance, spanning as it does the early and middle La Tene, and providing an exceptionally rich and well-documented collection of metalwork.” (Doran, 1973: 150-151.) Here we see a sophisticated processual technique being applied to a data suite collected long ago, and for which the materials are unlikely to be accessible, or perhaps may no longer exist, thus eliminating the possibility of rechecking. Even if anthropometrics were applied at the time of excavation, which is doubtful, the techniques would be crude by modern standards, and the
accuracy of the results from which Doran generated his secondary- or tertiary-tier conclusions, is resultantly obscure. In justifiable caution, Doran comments apropos of the kind of questions prior, more conventional studies had sought to answer: “… these questions are not considered without reference to our general knowledge of the La Tene. However, this background knowledge is neither comprehensive nor very reliable, and it is arguable that as little reliance as possible should be placed upon it.” He does not, however, question the reliability of determination of the age/sex demographic of the mortuary population in question, and this may in time prove the most unreliable statistic of all.

If this postulate is supportable, it suggests a fundamental flaw in either the methodology or the underlying theory. It would indicate that the extant model is not revealing in terms of the lifestyle of extinct cultures, but merely accumulates data (whose accuracy is suspect) on the normative social practices for some individuals in some places and times, and upon which we have placed very much our own construction. This is an insubstantial basis on which to erect developed models of past societies.

Today, the most widespread means of sexing skeletal remains is via gross morphologies and physical morphometrics. Grave goods are often used to suggest potential gender roles and thus indirectly sex can be inferred, but this is no longer a dominant method in world archeology. However, in some places and in past decades, the model has been so strongly supported that it has at times fostered irrational speculation (see the Vix Princess case study, in Chapter Four). Arnold and Wicker (2001) provide a current review of methodologies for seeking gender information in mortuary studies around the world.

Grave goods and exhumed materials are themselves usually fragmentary and often ambiguous, and analyses of whole mortuary complexes (which may still represent uncomfortably small sample groups for statistical purposes) is required to yield patterns and trends for the peoples occupying various times and places, yet from these trends past workers
have erected complex models of social interaction, class distinction and — the focus of this study — gender roles derived from associations of grave goods with male and female skeletons.

**Bias Factors**

How could such a matrix of implicit information come to have been constructed? Any grave, as a time capsule, is a “frame of a movie,” or to use a more modern analogy, a “fractal” section at a tangible level through a far more complex whole, and the paucity of information poses more questions than the materials themselves answer. Fitting the materials into a comprehensive whole is necessary to build an understandable picture, and it is in this endeavour that certain human biases come naturally into play.

Nothing is more natural than to “view the past through the eyes of the present,” but this is, almost always, a prejudicial view. All the assumptions and conceits of the extant culture will automatically be mapped onto the extinct culture, and while the result may be comfortingly familiar, even politically or socially attractive, it is almost certainly artificial (Hays-Gilpin and Whitley, 1998: 5).

The tendency to do this may be motivated by a mixture of the simple conceit of a) Western culture in the centuries when archaeology evolved from a gentleman’s delectation (“humanistic antiquarianism” in the parlance of Willey and Sabloff (1993)) into a formal field of study, and b) a continuity of history handed down from the Roman and Greek worlds, whose values and social devices were bequeathed to us. They have become our norms, and with thousands of years of continuity they take on a powerful permanence. As Britton (1997) said: “The fact that ancient texts are usually associated with either the Classical world or religious doctrines makes them particularly vulnerable to our subjectivity.” This is enhanced by Dommasne’s (1991) frankness: “…culture-dependency of conceptualisation is of course
the main reason why women and children have largely disappeared from the past;” and Gilchrist’s (1991: 496) contemporary harmony: “A feminist approach put forward an explicit theory of gender, to combat interpretations which accepted modern-day gender stereotypes as timeless, objective and ‘natural.’”

A certain realization is necessary to keep in mind that it was Greek and Roman military and cultural vigor that grafted their ways onto the world from Gibraltar to Bactria, and that the peoples who fell subject to them had differing ancestral cultures of their own, cultures that were often submerged, erased, by the overlying weight of “Hellenisation” or “Romanisation.” These different suites of norms are crucial to any interpretation of those cultures. Ideally, to seek contrasts to the social forms of the “Mediterranean super-powers” of the First Millennium BC we should look to cultures extant either before Greece and Rome came to power, or in lands beyond their spheres of influence, or both. This is not difficult, and embraces a wide range of well-documented cultures. But the core point remains: were founding analyses of these other peoples colored, in any sense, by the Mediterranean experience?

This same cognitive trap occurred in ancient times. For instance: when Herodotus of Halicarnassus traveled amongst the Scythians in the 5th century BC (The Histories, Book IV: Melpomene) he observed small tents where men would go to burn matter in tripodial braziers (IV: 76). As Scythians preserved a cultural taboo against use of water for washing (presumably because water was difficult to come by on the steppes, and heavy for nomads to carry with them), he assumed the tents constituted steambaths, something immediately understandable to one within Greek culture. Those very braziers have been found in (male and female) Steppe tombs (Talbot-Rice, 1957: 90; Rolle, 1989: 93-94), most notably at Pazyryk in 1929, including their contents — hemp seeds. The tents, while baring a direct similarity to the traditional Native American “sweat lodge,” were, it seems, marijuana dens,
though a spiritual/cultic role, or a use in preparations for battle, are also likely inclusive. The moral here is that it is easy to make fundamental errors, even in judgment of that which is before us. Herodotus observed the hemp seeds, was familiar with the hemp plant as a source of fibre for spinning a linnen-like cloth, but was entirely innocent of the narcotic property of the plant, and could not properly construe the howls of delight he heard from the tents.

A perhaps even more poignant example concerns artifacts which constitute “living fossils,” to draw a biological parallel. During excavations at Pokrovka, Kazakhstan, in 1993, Jeannine Davis-Kimball’s expedition found an odd bronze container with large (~25mm) perforations in the bottom (2002:35), and the purpose of the object was a mystery until Dr. Davis-Kimball’s ethnographic expedition to Western Mongolia in 1996, where she found functionally identical implements still in use. It was a colander, used to scoop large pieces of meat from cooking cauldrons — form follows function, but it’s not always obvious.

Concerning the archaeological record and extinct cultures, these assumptions involve analysis of the intangible. While an artefact is by itself often ambiguous, it is at least entirely physical. It can be measured, tested, related to others, and placed in space and time, and eventually reveal considerable information about its makers. But, if the ultimate goal of archaeology is, as Wheeler (1954) proposed, “to dig up people, not things” in other words to “get into the minds of past cultures,” we face the immediate spectre of preconception shading our judgments.

It is a precept of modern archaeology that this be understood and handled in as unbiased a way as possible, but certain preconceptions are difficult to challenge (Effros, pers. comm). Notions of the sequence of social and technological development are notoriously hard to influence, and those concerning social behaviour, values, the nuclear family and gender roles, are perhaps hardest of all, because these mechanisms remain in full force in our own culture, albeit in only one of what we now see to be a wide range of possible formats.
Again, nothing is more natural than for a parochial social system to resist the idea that other formats exist, or, if they exist, that they have any relevance or value to itself. But the anthropologist studies cultural variety, and the recognition that there are many ways of being human is a precept rightly applied by archaeology to past times. In a sense, archaeology (material difference over time and space) and anthropology (behavioural difference in space) are fields that should never have strayed so far apart, as their founding assumptions are so similar (Willey and Sabloff, 1993). Whereas Prehistory and Social Anthropology developed as separate disciplines in Europe, in the United States Archeology evolved as a sub-discipline of Anthropology.

Greece and Rome were cultures that came to their heights of power late in the pre-Christian world, and their direct physical influence extended many centuries into the era-AD. But they were the descendants of older cultures, and tracing those rootstocks is never easy. Ultimately, the theory of the common descent of the Indo-European group is an important unifying factor, and pertains to many distinct later cultures. Are there any unifying social characteristics amongst these peoples that may have spread and been expressed without erasure by the influence of the late-blooming powerful states, or, conversely, been generated by evolution in comparative isolation? This is by no means a new question, and Indo-European theorists have considered it at length (Mallory, 1989 : 110). The notion of sexual equality being one of those ancestral attributes, however, is seriously at odds with the strong patriarchal nature of Indo-European society as gleaned from linguistic evidence and the putative connection to the kurgan culture advanced by Gimbutas (Mallory, 1989 : 183-185).

It is perhaps a fateful coincidence that the spread of the Indo-Europeans took place through lands native to the ancestral horse following its contraction to the Steppes due to hunting pressures during and after the last Ice Age (Clutton-Brock, 1992 : 24). It seems likely
that the horse was first domesticated by Indo-European hands. For at least six thousand years (Taylor et al, 1991, 2000) Eurasia has been the scene of partnership between human and equine, and it is reasonable to assume that the peoples devolving from this region and lifestyle will have the closest affinity and understanding not only of the horse itself but of the possible roles the horse can play and the benefits it can offer human society. One of those benefits is sheer mobility, and the tactical and social freedom that implies offers the prospect of different roles for cultural units (and possibly genders) as compared to non-mobile peoples.

In its crudest sense, the mobility of the horse confers an advantage to anyone able to ride, regardless of age, sex or social status (crudely, and within the idiom of our own culture, implying gender-male, in contrast to the gender-female status of those who don’t ride). Thus it is obvious that 1) the horse, as a resource, would be controlled by the powerful to preserve their advantage over lower social strata in their own cultures, as well as provide a bastion against other cultures, and 2) in our traditional view, women belong to a subordinate social position, and are thus not directly associated with the privileges of horsemanship. Both of these precepts are found in Scythian culture (Talbot-Rice, 1957; Rolle, 1989), but in the cultures of the Celts (Thompson, 1996), the Sauro-Sarmatians and the Saka (Davis-Kimball, 1997/98; 1998; 2002), the second precept may today be very substantially challenged.

For many centuries, the privilege associated with rank and power were obtained by women through marriage or inheritance. While high-born women had access to horses, such restrictions as the side-saddle were introduced, and, though motivations would be couched in notions of ‘gender-appropriate behaviour,’ (to ride astride would demand trousers, which was proscribed attire for women) it is hard to conceive of them as being for any ultimate reason other than to limit women’s riding ability with a pointed cleaving to inefficiency — thus preserving the status quo of the extant culture. Interestingly, a 2nd-3rd c AD bas relief
considered to depict the Celtic goddess Epona, from Kastel, Germany, presents her riding side-saddle, a common-enough image (Green, in Green, 1995 : 475), suggesting this convention has a pre-Christian pedigree. Piggott (1992 : 19) observes that side-saddle seems a purely western convention, as women rode astride in the east. The church of the Middle Ages, under such hands as Gregory VII, was obsessed with prescribing “correct” behaviour for the sexes (*Studi Gregoriani*, 1991) and the ritualised lifestyle it promoted, while debatable as to its genuine effectiveness amongst ordinary people, certainly supported in most material ways the suppression of female independence and self-determination.

These constitute some of the social traits grafted onto people of Indo-European descent, and likely overthrowing more ancient standards. But today we have seen, in the last forty years or so, a radical shift in female power structures in the Western world. While the process of emancipation and genuine social change are far from complete, the progress toward equal access to the resources and privileges of our culture for either sex has reached, to the best of our knowledge, a more advanced state than at any other time in history.

But is the thrust of the last statement unconditionally true? It cannot be, our knowledge of past times is always going to be incomplete, and it may be that the norms which until so recently specified gender-based social dimorphism as an absolute in our own culture have also coloured our interpretation of past cultures. Thus, in light of our own social evolution, it is perhaps appropriate to reexamine the evidence for historic and prehistoric peoples. Indeed, given that ‘gender in archaeology’ is now a field of study in its own right (Nelson, 1997; Gilchrist, 1999; Sorensen, 2000; Nelson and Rosen-Ayalon, 2002), it may be inevitable that this reassessment will be made.

The cultures in which the archaeological and historic records suggest women held social status relative to men differing significantly to that of our traditional Graeco-Roman model, are a broad and diverse group that share descent from the Indo-European stem, and
span the world from Ireland to China. Is it coincidental that almost all of them (with pointed exceptions, e.g., Minoan Crete — see Chapter Six) are also the primary horse-using cultures of the Old World, or might that relationship be consequential?

Evidence for women occupying a social stratum markedly higher than amongst Classical Mediterranean peoples is derived from three sources — grave goods, Classical commentaries and testimonies from peoples whose cultures survived into literate times. When the exceptionally rich tomb of the “Vix Princess” was discovered in 1952 controversy erupted at once (for actual reasons that will be examined later) — a female, buried with high status goods?

This was an example of material culture in marked schism with modern expectations (the “direct historical approach” (see p43) could neither predict nor account for such a discovery.) There were many possible interpretations: was it a “class” thing? The opulence of the grave could imply social status extending to all members of a noble family regardless of age or sex, thus fitting the pattern for “ascribed,” rather than “achieved” status. This is well-documented in other contexts, e.g., the cremation/secondary inhumation cemetery at Ferigile in the Carpathians, where, despite weapons and horsetack in the graves, the remains were almost all of children, and thus unlikely to have been the users of the objects (Taylor, 1994 : 383). The physical sex of the Vix remains was questioned for more than thirty-five years, but she is hardly the only female royal burial known from Indo-European-derived cultures.

The Scythian princess from the Chertomlyk kurgan was buried with opulent goods, though in the Scythian continuum power seems to derive explicitly from consort status. Female warrior graves are another matter, they imply achieved status, in which power derives from personal worth and prowess. While there are a significant number of such tombs in the Ukraine (over forty were known by 1980) (Rolle, 1989 : 89) they almost certainly are
not of Scythian ethnicity (discussed in detail later), and it is from further east that clear indicators emerge, such as the gender-egalitarian mounted warrior culture of the Sauro-Sarmatians, and the high-status females of the Saka, including the significant number of female warrior graves at Pokrovka and the shamanic/cultic female burials at Pazyryk, in southern Siberia (Davis-Kimball, 1997/98).

Why is this body of information not a signatory wakeup-call for ancient anthropology, especially in the West? Davis-Kimball (1998) comments: “Although a few notes have been penned about nomadic women, little effort has been applied to interpreting archeological materials from an unbiased point of view.” Elucidating the reason for such an attitude, Effros (2000 : 632) says:

Resistance to a comprehensive re-evaluation of current methods of sexing mortuary remains stems from negative perceptions of a feminist search for ‘female warriors.’ This outlook incorrectly assumes that grave goods accurately reflected the deceased’s accomplishments rather than representing an ideological construction by contemporaries.

This is a difficult statement to construe, but the closing sentence, while a valuable caution, is fully as assumptive as its inverse. Effros (pers. comm.) clarified her position, that some establishments vigorously resist notions that influence the comfortable continuity of culture, and challenge to normative gender behaviours comes under this heading.

To offer perspective on this resistance:

If a male skeleton displaying the pathological features of battle wounds (Boylston, 2000 : 357-380) is accompanied by a sword, we find no social difficulty in concluding that he was a warrior, but if a woman’s skeleton (assuming it may be properly recognised as such) displays similar features, e.g. an arrowhead within the thoracic cavity, (“the tip bent as if it had deflected off a bone;” Pokrovka Cemetery 2, Kurgan 7, Burial 2. excavated 1994; Davis-Kimball, pers. comm.) then, osteological and pathological evidence (e.g., musculoskeletal markers diagnostic of weapon use; see Knusel, (2000 : 381-401) for
problems and progress in this area) notwithstanding, the horse tack, sword, bow or spear in her grave must have been placed there ideologically by someone else, because women, by definition, are noncombatants. More often, this maneuvering is unnecessary because the weapons mean the individual is automatically assigned male, and neither morphological analysis nor anthropometrics may even be carried out.

Conkey and Spector (in Hays-Gilpin and Whitley, 1998: 20) highlight these assumptive biases in Howard Winters’ 1968 work on archaic Midwestern mortuary materials:

…when grinding pestles are found with females in burial contexts, they are interpreted as reflecting the grinding and food processing activities of women. When such items are found associated with males, however, they suggest to Winters that the men must have manufactured these artifacts (for their women?), or utilized them as hammerstones in other (less feminine?) tasks.

Whatever the current trends in various parts of the world, this attitude has been widespread in the past, and in the absence of indisputable anthropometric data stereotypic assumptions were always applied. Davis-Kimball (1997/98) says:

Archeologists of the late 19th and 20th centuries amplified the long-standing convictions that the Early Iron Age tribes were warring, strong patriarchal societies. Over the decades archeologists continued to interpret kurgan burials from this point of view. In this world, women seem hardly to have existed. Among hundreds of excavations during the Soviet period, if skeletons were not sexed according to the rules of physical anthropology, gender was assigned based upon the material culture found in the burials. Therefore, the gender and status of the deceased conformed with the preconceived roles of stereotyped male warrior hordes. The popular notion of patriarchal warring societies is not supported by the archeological evidence, however. According to information supplied by many professionals, women in Central Asian societies were accorded a higher status and a more equal gender relationship than those found in sedentary Eurasian societies.

This is an example of cultural bias resisting an obvious but, for some, unpalatable conclusion, and the mechanism of this bias will be examined in this study.

From Effros (2000: 635) again:

Because a woman’s grave containing weaponry remains inconceivable, current methodological dictates mean that none will ever be found.

While Effros, following Conkey and Spector (1984: 3-19), is here referring to the
situation in post-Celtic, early-medieval Europe, that strident attitude is easily applied across the board. In the same paper she refers to female weapon graves from early medieval England examined by Heinrich Härke (1997), 11 graves (1.57% of a sample of 702 inhumations considered) which contained both weapons and skeletons definitely or tentatively identified as female. Given our preconceptions of the prevailing social conditions of Anglo-Saxon times, this discovery is more perplexing than Celtic or steppe-culture finds, and one is tempted to ascribe the weapons to a votive status. Yet this is to fly into the arms of precisely the bias castigated above in other contexts, and if there is an overriding theme of the current study, it is to assume nothing without vigorous question. If the female identification is correct, and the weapons represent achieved status rather than votive offering, then even in a culture as gender-restrictive as Anglo-Saxon Britain may have been, women bearing arms were not unknown (see Chapter Four). Demonstrating this convincingly, however, would be difficult, as the materials are, while not unique, both comparatively rare and bereft of any documentary context. One possibility, should swords be present, addresses the probable malformations of the hand and forearm bones the use of the sword, moreso than the axe, has been suggested to generate (Murphy, 1998: 484): this relationship is still being explored, but if a positive correlation can be demonstrated, and if associated skeletons display these pathological features it becomes a reasonable assumption that the weapons were used by the inhumed individuals.

To examine the converse, is there any evidence for the expressly symbolic possession of weapons by women in the context of non-Mediterranean peoples?

Tacitus (c. AD 56-120) provides just such an instance. Froncek (1975: 130-131) interprets well-known passages from the Germania as reference to “Northmen” – Cimbri and Teutons — though the revised Hansford translation of 1948 (Mattingly, 1970) makes no mention of such names; indeed Tacitus seems to speak broadly of a “German” people, an
entity which in that sense surely never existed. In this context, he was writing at the end of the 1st century AD, referring to events some two hundred years earlier (Wells, 1995 : 606), when climatic change forced the Northmen southward and into conflict with Rome. His ethnographic commentaries include observations on marriage customs (Ch. 18; Froncek’s condensation):

“They are … almost unique amongst barbarians in being content with one wife apiece.” Women are regarded as possessing “an element of holiness and a gift of prophesy; and so they do not scorn their advice, or lightly disregard their replies.” And in marriage, said Tacitus, it was the man who supplied the dowry; his gifts consisted of oxen, a horse and bridle, perhaps a shield, a spear and a sword.

Here is a statement it would be easy to take at face value. The role of weapons in the culture is clearly of close to spiritual meaning (evidenced by other comments from Tacitus’ journal), and which may be likened to the Celtic fascination and obsession with warfare, and the sword in particular (Cunliffe, 1986 : 48-49). Thus women may indeed have held weapons symbolically, as Tacitus goes on to outline, a significator of authority in the home and of strength in the community, perhaps. Also, Tacitus’ comments concerning the regard with which women were held in their communities is on a parallel with the spiritual role of women in steppe cultures, though on the steppes shamanic and priestess roles were found side by side with warrior women (see Chapter Two).

It is significant that while a sword may be possessed symbolically by a woman, a horse is unlikely to have been a nonfunctional luxury. So did Northwomen ride or drive? Oxen for ploughing, weapons “for show,” perhaps: what was the role of the horse and tack, if not practical? We may surmise the man had the use of the horse that was nominally his wife’s property, but if so, why attach significance to “her” gifted weapons?

Tacitus’ comments on these Germanic peoples may be compared to his writings on other tribal identities — cultures in which women were chattels, and had the status of slaves (see Chapter Three). This is very confusing, and underlines the cultural diversity amongst the
peoples of Central Europe at this time. How accurate Tacitus’ documentary sources were, and to what extent he misinterpreted, demonized or glorified what he was seeing or hearing, we may never be certain, but clearly major differences of opinion existed regarding the status and perception of women in northern Europe in the second half of the 1st millennium BC. The tribal amalgams were fluid: semi-nomadic peoples and settled agriculturalists came into conflict over centuries, and boundaries were for the most part meaningless (Wells, 1995), but “Celticised Germans” and “Northmen” inhabited the Rhineland in various states of peace and war for many hundreds of years, and the values and attitudes prevalent in the German heartland appear to have varied significantly even prior to the Roman occupation.

Would a Roman have recorded the fact had the gift of weapons been of practical rather than symbolic value? Perhaps not. This offers a new perspective on Gaelic writings from the Early Christian era. Adamson (1999: 82):

It is interesting to note that Viking women warriors are mentioned only in Irish sagas: the sagas of the Vikings themselves depict an entirely domestic female gender, without role-overlap except amongst the gods. Speculation: perhaps the Celts of Ireland embellished their recounting of the Viking raids of Early Christian times with a detail familiar only to themselves.

Were there warrior women amongst the peoples of Northern Europe, or, assuming the ancient Teuton custom to have persisted, did the early Irish misinterpret symbolic weapons in the possession of women amongst the invaders? This is the kind of puzzle that may never be solved, but the absence at this time of the sort of unambiguous evidence found on the Steppes suggests either hard evidence is waiting for re-interpretation amongst the Northmen as it may be amongst the Celts, or that symbolic possession is indeed the correct interpretation.

Weapons are rare in female Viking-era inhumations, and few writers mention them, hardly surprising when social testimony from Christian-era writings casts self-determinant Viking women in the same mold as independent women in early Ireland: a pagan social aberration. But the surviving sagas and the tenth-century chronicles of Ibn Fadlan (and
others) amongst the Rus Viking merchants of the Ukraine (Jesch, 1991: 119 - 123) have brought to light non-stereotypic social norms, such as the apparent female control of family wealth and finances in Viking society. Scales, locks and keys, and chests or caskets are common female grave goods (Dommasne, 1992). Ibn Fadlan tells us women competed against men in the sport of glima, wrestling, still practiced today in Iceland (Davis-Kimball, 2002: 218) which suggests the women of these times were more than impressive physical specimens. The Arab ethnographer also records the torc had come into use as a status symbol amongst eastern Viking women, and gold and silver were the common materials, again suggesting considerable affluence.

While Ibn Fadlan’s account of suttee has dominated much thinking on the status of women amongst the widespread Viking-derived cultures, it should not obscure the fact that men seem to have been sacrificed to accompany lone females to the afterlife also (Jesch, 1991: 25), and that the fabulous 9th century Oseberg ship burial from southwestern Norway, the richest of all Viking tombs (excavated 1904), contained two female skeletons. Nevertheless, despite every worldly need being supplied for the afterlife, the burial contained no weapons or treasure (though the tomb was also robbed at some point, which leaves doubt as to whether it ever may have contained objects of such value.)

In light of these broad hints as to possible female status amongst the Scandinavians, perhaps there were warrior women in the Viking sphere. Jesch (1991: 109), in reference to a neo-legendary female Viking warrior spoken of in the 12th c Irish text the Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh sums up thus:

The legend of the warrior maiden who invaded Ireland was to be a pervasive one in later Irish lore of all kinds. But the reference in the Cogadh is so brief that we have no way of judging whether it can have any historical basis. Women warriors were certainly part of the mental universe of the early Scandinavians, for we find them both in literature and in art, but it is more difficult to argue that they existed in fact. The Red Maiden, if she ever existed, is too elusive to be pinned down.
Early Sources

It is essential, when attempting to relate information from dissimilar sources, to place the documentation constituting the “historical” component of ancient studies into an archaeological perspective. Catherine Hills (1997) said:

Words, even when spoken or written in good faith, are inevitably selective, limited and biased from the perspective of their author, and they are very often deliberately chosen to convey a message, a message which need not be in any way based on considered judgment. That supposes that the words can be read, and that a reliable meaning can be attached to them. Many early documents however are incomplete, in ancient scripts and in dead languages: hieroglyphs, cuneiform, runes. Considerable skill is needed to arrive at a translated text which will still often be incomplete and enigmatic.

Which is amply supported by Lamberg-Karlovsky and Sabloff (1979 : 3):

In dealing with texts from the remote past, the modern reader meets with conceptual barriers which become a constant source of misunderstanding and misinterpretation. Just as the physical plan, the social structure, the economic foundations — and almost every other aspect of a civilization — have varied from one culture to another over time, so has the way people think.

And on seeking women in an incomplete record, Judith Jesch (1991 : 87), in reference to the chronicles of Ibn Fadlan amongst the Rus Vikings, said:

Such considerations apply to all uses of these sources, but there are additional ones which come into play when we examine the sources in order to write a history of women. Thus the high frequency of references to sex and divorce in Arabic sources may tell us as much about the position of women in Islamic society as it does about the seemingly macho world of Vikings.

This is the difficulty in interpreting literary, “historic” sources, touched on elsewhere in this study, and should be borne in mind when applying those sources to the cultures represented by the material record. However, Rosedahl (1987 : 60) refers to reports by other Arab travellers, this time to Viking communities in Britain and Ireland prior to AD 1000, that divorce was the right of women, not men, which at least reinforces the observations in the east, and lends weight as a cross-matched reference. Ideally, documentary and physical sources of information should support each other, but this is less common in practice than
may be hoped for. Taylor (1994 : 373) commented, “... the understanding of the past gained from archaeology is broadly different in nature to understanding derived from historical texts. Having both sorts of evidence is a boon and a challenge.”

Classical sources provide conflicting accounts, or at times a total and frustrating absence of information. Herodotus describes the status and lifestyle of Scythian women in only the most passing of detail, there is no systematic description such as he provides of almost every facet of the lifestyles of the other cultures he visited. What little we can glean tallies closely with the traditional roles practiced as little as a hundred years ago (Vainshtein, 1980, cited in Clutton-Brock, 1992 : 101) and which may still be seen in descendant form today, but a dangerous degree of inference enters the analysis. Indeed, in Central Asian Kazakhstan and Mongolia, such traditions broadly remain in force at the beginning of the 21st century, however the actual degree of gender-equality can be quite surprising (Davis-Kimball, 2002 : 36), relating to ancient tribal law superseding current Islamic custom, and thus raising the question of how accurately Herodotus interpreted his observations 25 centuries ago. Niall O’Connor (1997) has this to say:

While archaeology has show that several features from Herodotus’ account are accurate, this does not mean that the Scythians existed exactly as he described them. Herodotus, from whom we know most about these ‘nomads’, constructs the ‘Scythians’ out of a more heterogenous reality, a more polyethic/polycultural situation, which the names of other tribes would appear to imply. The fact that these other names are often nothing more than ‘those with fine horses’ or ‘Scythians who plough’ imply that Herodotus does not fully understand the complex cultural or ethnic situation which he is trying to describe.

The Scythians controlled the Pontic Steppe through most of the middle centuries of the 1st millennium BC, and it is perhaps unavoidable that an attempt should be made to relate the forty or more known female warrior graves of the Ukraine to the Paralatae. They are paradoxical in the face of the above model, and they almost certainly do not belong to any stratum of the Scythian culture. Nomadic migrations and the ebb and flow of tribal territorial
boundaries over time may well have seen ethnic groupings range far from the lands we most commonly associate with them, and these graves seem to be warriors and warrior-priestesses of South Ural ethnic origins (Davis-Kimball, pers. comm).

Other classical accounts are those of Roman commentarists concerning the Gauls and other ‘barbarian’ cultures they encountered in the northward expansion of the Empire. Though the ‘filtration’ of fact through the eyes of Roman political interests can never be ignored, these accounts provide us with our most graphic, living picture of these peoples, and while descriptions of Celtic women may have been exaggerated so as to provide delicious scandal amongst the reading public in the heartlands of the Empire, the information as presented is sufficiently similar to later accounts of the Gaels that it is tempting to take it at face value.

Indeed, Strabo (cited in Chapman, 1992: 170) gives us perhaps our most telling comment, powerful because of its generality:

But as for their customs relating to the men and the women (I mean the fact that their tasks have been exchanged, in a manner opposite to what obtains among us), it is one which they share in common with many other barbarian peoples.

If one can for a moment avoid seeing the generalizing hand of Roman self-interest in this statement, it would seem a “civilized” journalist is telling us that he believed at least some, perhaps many, peoples beyond the Mediterranean world held gender values that were the inverse of those of the culture passed down to us.

Amongst the most poignant of ancient voices is the “Brehon Laws” of Ireland. The name derives from the Breitheam, the judges in early Ireland. Written down in Early Christian times, the Brehon Laws are a legal canon of considerable sophistication evolved in ancient times as an oral code. The Brehon tracts are also considered to more closely reflect the earliest Celtic codes due to isolation from the Scottish, Welsh and other equivalents, which evolved in Early Christian times in distinctly different directions with regard to sexual
equality. The surviving transcription of the Irish code provides a rare example of a fully developed social system belonging to a non-literate culture, which remained extant during the transition to literacy and being subsequently recorded. It is built upon pagan perspectives and derives from the experience of ‘barbarian’ Europe, carried to Ireland during the westward migration of the Celts, the Goidelic-speaking Gauls who became, in later centuries, the Gaels of Ireland, Scotland and the Western Isles (the Q-Celtic group). Thus this legal system is not influenced by Mediterranean notions of propriety, nor Judeo-Christian imperatives (unlike the P-Celtic group, especially the Welsh), and it is not until AD 697 and the Cain Adamnain (Thompson, 1996 : 71) that we have an indication of the early church significantly influencing a law concerned with notions of gender-appropriate behaviour in Ireland.

In reference to the ‘purity’ of sources over time, Thompson (1996 : 16) points to the geographic isolation of the Irish tradition as a key to the most ancient forms:

… the Celts of Ireland were never seriously threatened, let alone conquered, by either the Romans or the early waves of Teutonic invaders. Thus the pagan Irish oral traditions survived in relatively intact form until the arrival of Christian missionaries. In contrast the oral traditions of other Celtic cultures either disappeared completely or survived in extremely fragmented form with a thick veneer of non-Celtic elements.

The image supported by these widely varied sources is one in which, beyond the boundaries of Graeco-Roman and Judeo-Christian influence, there existed in temperate Europe and Asia a social system in which women were not second class citizens. They held positions of religious importance (e.g., the Ban-Drui of Ireland, and the priestesses of the Saka), received royal, cultic and warrior burial where appropriate (Vix, Dürrnberg, Issyk, Pokrovka, etc.), and occupied a prominent martial status from Ireland to China (e.g.. The Book of Ballymote, or the Cain Adamnain’s injunction against women being required to perform military service in Ireland, which provide reference to some status in the far West paralleling that of the women occupying the warrior graves of Central Asia.)

These concepts are alien to the demure, retreating, dependent women promoted as
‘normality’ by, e.g., Classical Greece, where by the time of Pericles (died 431 BC) a virtual *zanaan* system had come into effect (see Chapter Five). While women in Rome were not denied education, they preserved something of the Greek model in terms of proscribed behaviours and gender segregation — or at least an orthodox *pretension* to this. This may be contrasted with the Etruscan model, in which women enjoyed a much more egalitarian status and entered into revels in a manner reminiscent of Celts, to the scandalisation of the Greeks.

Given the “swathe of sex-equality” (e.g., equal access to a variety of social roles for males and females) that may be perceived crossing the map of the Old World, it seems far from coincidental that these were primary horse cultures. The Greeks and Romans used horses secondarily throughout their tenure, the Assyrians and Persians absorbed the horse only gradually, and the Hebrews never did. The Egyptians absorbed horsemanship from the Hyksos and maintained an equestrian tradition, but the Kingdoms of the Pharhaonic Epoch represent another cultural stem entirely. In all these cases, horses were a new “technology” acquired by already-mature civilisations, and were exploited within the terms of existing social structures: amongst the steppe cultures and the Celts, as with the Plains Indians in North America post-ca 1640, when an uprising of Pueblo peoples against the Spaniards released large numbers of horses (Page, 1979: 65-66), the advent of horsemanship had a powerful, shaping influence on the society and its activities, by which the society evolved into a new form. This is the mechanism by which this writer defines *primary* and *secondary* horse-using cultures, and a discussion of gender relations within a sample of these cultures appears in Chapter Six.

So, it is fair to ask, on the native grasslands of the horse, did the mobility and independence they offered foster a social system that provided equal access to various roles by both men and women, or did a preexisting system find its best expression in equestrian pursuits (which might subsequently have reinforced that system)? And do modern social
biases interfere with our ability to recognise such a system, manifest in the mechanism by which we interpret the information obtained from both excavations and documentation? This discussion forms Chapter Seven.

In the next chapter, the principle cultures in question are considered in detail. The Celts, the Scythians, the Sauro-Sarmatians, the Saka and their eastern neighbors are examined in geographic, temporal, documentary and archeological contexts, including their Indo-European rootstock ancestry, and an analysis of the potential pitfalls encountered when applying the Direct Historical Approach too liberally.
Chapter Two:

Who Were These Peoples?

It is perhaps a bias that our knowledge of the Greeks, the Romans and their influence on the world is as complete as it is partially by virtue of the fact that they were *literate* cultures, and thus speak to us in their own words. Older surviving cultures, e.g., Egypt, Persia and elsewhere, preserved their own writings and thus also speak to us from times before the Mediterranean expansions, but almost without exception (e.g., the Hittites of Anatolia), those older cultures descending from the Indo-European rootstock were not literate. Their representatives of the mid- to late-first millennium BC were described by classical sources, and, as the Herodotus hemp-seed example illustrates, that layer of filtration at once imposes the bias of interpretation according to the norms of the writers’ social climate.

With regard to the initial spread and establishment of the Indo-European stock, archaeology operates essentially without benefit of ancient sources, and perhaps this is no bad thing. With the layer of filtration removed we can assess the evidence directly, subject only to our own judgmental biases. While not perfect, it is at least a simplification.

“Indo-European” refers not to a physical culture represented by an archaeological record, but to a *language group*, whose individual tongues share common elements of European, Eurasian and Indian languages. This is more an anthropological study rather than either an archeological or historical one. Indeed, the evidence on which the Indo-European theory of cultural descent patterns is based is, at this time, *entirely* linguistic (Mallory, 1989 : 8; Renfrew, 1990 : 16). Philology and archaeology are not necessarily the best bedfellows, sometimes producing results which, due to the incomplete nature of any body of knowledge, can seem contradictory or paradoxical. But the disciplines have, in a general sense, come to
compliment each other and much productive work has resulted, for example the efforts to
determine the course of Polynesian migration from lingual drift across the Pacific (Bellwood,
1978 : 27). In addition, the colonisation of North America via the Beringian bridge during the
last interglacial period is supported by linguistic evidence, the drift of an east Siberia
“mother-tongue” to become the rootstock of the varied languages of the Native American
cultures (Greenberg, 1987; Nichols, 1990; Rodgers et al, 1990).

Linguists reconstruct archaic languages by comparative analysis of existing and
recent historic languages (e.g., Ancient Greek and Classical Latin) descended therefrom and
can derive patterns of cultural contact in certain areas within certain timeframes. The
Indo-European model evolved in the 18th and 19th centuries from the philological studies of
scholars such as James Parsons, August Schleicher and Johannes Schmidt (Mallory, 1989 :
9-20). The term “Indo-European” was first proposed by Thomas Young in 1813, and remains
a bedrock model for the spread of the major proto-Eurasian stock.

It has so far proven almost impossible to pinpoint their place of origin. Renfrew
placed them in Turkey, and Gimbutas north of the Caspian Sea. Recent theories have favored
the Balkans (Gamkrelidze, 1990), and that the descendants of this initial culture-spread (a
core-periphery motion in consequence of simple population growth, as opposed to
“migration” or “invasion”) during Neolithic times south and east, across Greece into Turkey,
and eventually encompassed the Black Sea and occupied the Caucasus region. However,
Gamkrelidze and Ivanov have been severely criticized for this and other conclusions, an
outcome of much Indo-European theorising. This field is permanently in flux, and resolution
of linguistic and archeological data sets is notoriously unforthcoming.

Wherever the Indo-Europeans originated, over a space of millennia (6th-4th Millennia
BC) their composite waves or centers of occupation gave rise to cultures developing in
comparative isolation, therefore of languages also drifting to some degree, and these cultural
units further drifted and divided, giving rise in time to the progenitors of cultures as diverse as the Celts of Europe and the Hsiung-Nu of Mongolia. While we may never establish a physical signature for any people whom we might dub the “Indo-Europeans,” their rootstock language is information transmitted to us by repetition and plottable distortion across thousands of years, and, as with the analogy of the footprints of an invisible man, it provides us a once-removed glimpse of an otherwise totally intangible cultural age.

The Mediterranean microcosm (the Graeco-Italic language group, allied both philologically and geographically with the Celtic branch) developed out of one of these ancient phases of expansion, and evolved in comparative segregation a way of life sustained by the “Inner Sea.” Notwithstanding the linguistic similarities inferring a commonality of heritage in more distant antiquity, at these early times the shore-dwellers were quarantined from the Bell-Beaker and later Urnfield cultures to the north by the Alps, a largely impenetrable barrier to all but the hardiest, best-guided merchants. Even as late as the beginning of the Iron Age, the largely Bronze Age Golasecca Culture, centred on lakes Como, Lugano and Maggiore still served as a trade intermediary between Etruscan Italy and Hallstatt Europe by controlling the Alpine route (Cunliffe, 1997: 51).

Similarly, the sea itself insulated the cultures of southern Europe from the influences of the emerging North African peoples, and *vice versa*, and limitations in transport technology made impractical perhaps until Helladic times major journeys to east or west. (However, it must be considered that the obsidian trade to Melos in Neolithic times implies a vessel of some sort (Vermeule, 1964). Depending on the culture in question, sea transport was quite sophisticated by the Early Bronze Age, and post-1000 BC there is little doubt that exploration to east or west by Greeks, Phoenecians and others was a matter of time and economics, not strictly technical limitations.)

Thus the peoples of the Greek peninsula and the Etruscan region of northern Italy
gave rise to social precepts in a comparative isolation easy to misinterpret: those precepts have been transmitted to us in an unbroken continuity, thus it is perhaps natural for us to assume that the Mediterranean was the centre of the world — when it was more properly a fortunate but isolated arena for social development, and merely one of many culture groupings.

Elsewhere, the Middle East’s classic cultures — Babylonia, Assyria, Persia — were the seats of ancient empires, descending from the Neolithic farmers of the Fertile Crescent in more or less direct lineage. Sumer may be the first instance of the emergence of “civilization” as we know it, defined in agriculture supporting a hierarchical social structure, with organized religion and state-level warfare. The Sumerian culture survived for thousands of years and is viewed as embodying the barbaric practices we almost stereotypically associate with ancient times. A literate culture, we have records and artworks from early dates and gender roles are represented in the data pool. For instance, Lamberg-Karlovsky and Sabloff (1979 : 167) comment:

As in Dynastic Egypt, there seems to have been little sex discrimination in burial honors accorded to noble personages. The excavation of Queen Shubad’s (Puabi) tomb [ca 2400 BC] attests to the fact that ladies of the court were given the same gruesomely lavish attention as the males.

Babylonia, while an independent city-state for much of its tenure, became the capital of the Assyrian Empire during the reign of Hammurabi (late 18th c BC) and survived into Persian times as the hub of a succession of sprawling imperial structures in the Middle East. Superficially, in terms of massive architecture, organized religion, trade, commerce, literacy and numeracy, slavery, and a warlike, patrilineal national character, the ancient Middle East was typical of later cultures. A detailed comparative deconstruction of gender roles amongst these cultural streams is beyond the scope of this review, and only selected examples will be examined where particularly germane to discussion of the target cultures.
The Indo-Europeans are one of the most ephemeral cultures of the Neolithic to earliest Bronze Age. It is perhaps risky to deem them a culture at all, as there are no specific artefact suites associated with them, but simply a unified linguistic rootstock that must have been spoken by someone.

However, what is not in dispute is that their descendent cultures evolved in whorls and eddies of sociocultural driving forces in the habitat-niches through which they moved, giving rise to well-understood daughter civilizations which owe at least the manner of their speech to their unknown parents. This drift occurred over three, even four, thousand years, and the Indo-European stocks divided many times, with distinctly different cultures arising in different environments or geographic locations.

Prominent amongst those descendant cultures are those which embody the traits that are the focus of this study: horsemanship and its resultant social cascade, and the rise of cultures in which a significant degree of gender equality is currently recognised, or may be substantially argued for. Below are brief summaries of these peoples.

**The Celts (see map p31)**

*A Note on Current Controversy*

Of all the peoples addressed in this paper, the Iron Age tribes who characterised Europe north of the Alps are the most controversial, and the subject of an ongoing debate as to their historical verity and the true meanings of our perceptions of them.

During the 1990s the very term “Celt” came under assault from noted workers (e.g., Barry Raftery, 1994; John Collis, 1997; Simon James, 1999) who postulate that the Celts as they have been portrayed in modern historical archaeology are an artificial amalgam of peoples whose social, linguistic, artistic and ethnic affiliations can neither be properly assessed, nor, as far as can be determined, are sufficiently ubiquitous to support the notion of
MAP #1 Iron Age Europe and the Expansion of the “Celtic” Peoples

From: Megaw & Megaw (1989, 2001)

a single ethnic entity occupying vast territories. This is an expansionist view, in which the peoples commonly unified (simplified?) as “the Celts” are represented as a multitude of independent cultures, with the attendant alterations of claims to national and geographic priority otherwise appropriate.

This applies pointedly to the traditional view that the Celts of Europe expanded into the British Isles in the course of their migrations throughout much of Europe, and apparent dichotomies between the material record and the anticipated models such an assumption calls for (James, 1999: 37). The philology of the Celts, instrumental in theories of Celtic unity (Cunliffe, 1997: 21-25) is largely discounted as inconclusive, or worse, undemonstrable by existing methods, even biased, a perhaps convenient viewpoint when contrasted with the entirely linguistic discipline of Indo-European studies. Celtic linguistics have been an area of intense work, despite generally inspecific results (Evans, 1995: 8-20), and the anti-Celtic theorists perhaps dispense with linguistics too easily.

It has been pointed out (Megaw and Megaw, 1996) that the new theory, sponsored mainly from Britain, appeared seemingly concomitant with the founding of the European Union, in which Britain broadly declined to participate. James (1999: 12) stridently denies political motivation. While the discussion is erudite and founded in the tenets of modern theory, it remains controversial and emotive as it directly influences the “sense of self” for a large portion of the modern population of Britain and indeed elsewhere in the world, and the opposing sentiments are unlikely to find resolution quickly. Cunliffe (1997: 19) compartmentalised the issue in a single paragraph:

There are currently two extreme perceptions of the Celts: the New Celtomania, which provides a vision of a European past to comfort us at a time when ethnic divisions are becoming a painful and disturbing reality, and a politically correct view, which argues that the term is so abused as to be useless except to those who wish to increase the sales of their books. Both views contain some threads of value but in their extremity they are sterile.
For the purposes of the current analysis, the traditional viewpoint (that the British Isles fall within the geographic range of some diagnosable Celtic culture) is adhered to, with all appropriate current caveats and theoretical modifications presumed: ‘wave model’ replaces ‘invasion’; ‘trade contact’ is seen as more influential over time than isolated instances of ‘colonisation;’ stylistic differences in architecture, pottery, weapons, vehicles, decoration and all other aspects of material culture are considered the natural evolution of dynamic societies; and that the absence of a ‘universal archetype’ physical culture throughout the islands denoting a pre-Roman ‘Celtic Britain’ is seen to reflect merely the great sociocultural diversity of the Celtic-speaking peoples, which is well enough attested in Europe. Indeed, as Wells (1995) said:

For the period between 600 BC and the birth of Christ, similarities in material culture and human behaviour throughout the Celtic lands make it apparent that we are dealing with a single ‘culture’ on some level, though regional variations in style of ornament and in features of burial practice and settlement structure are always present.

The Standard Model and An Historical Perspective

The Indo-European Celtic language group is found north of the Alps, physically divided from the Italic and Greaco-Dorian Groups to the south, and from the Balto-Slavic group to the north (Mallory, 1989). The Bell-Beaker culture occupied much of Europe during the early Bronze Age and gave way to the Urnfield culture in the Second Millennium BC.

The Celts emerge from their Urnfield predecessors around the 8th century BC (Ross, 1986 : 15-16). Many of their social elements had already come into existence by the time the early Celts (Hallstatt B to C transitional period) appear in the record (e.g., characteristic textiles, bronzeworking, architecture etc.) and the factors that determine the definitional change include inhumation burial (as opposed to signatory Urnfield cremation and secondary burial), and the fairly abrupt appearance of both horsemanship and ironworking in the
Hallstatt record. These factors are subsequently endemic in the record of the Celts, throughout their range (from Turkey to Ireland), and might thus be nominated as unifying cultural traits in support of the reductionist model (in favour of a diagnosable pan-Celtic culture).

The Celts were a society of both fortress-builders and highly mobile cavalry and charioteers, and this is a fairly unique situation amongst primary, as opposed to secondary, horse-using cultures (see Chapter Six). For example, Steppe cultures (below) were nomadic through much of their tenure, only some elements of Scythian culture succumbing to the allure of settlement by the 4th c. BC; similarly, primary horse cultures in North America were largely nomadic. In contrast, Celts embraced the mobility of the horse while not relinquishing the solidarity of the fortress, thus presaging the power strategies of the Middle Ages.

The Celtic succession of Europe remains the subject of vigorous research, and gradually the picture of a Europe whose culture was quite independent of that of the Mediterranean shore has emerged. There are multitudinous contrasts, but as soon as the Classical record begins to feature Celts, often accounts of military confrontation (e.g., Rome, 390 BC, Delphi, 278 BC, Pergamum, 230 BC, Telamon, 225 BC) we find our vision of them coloured by the Greek and Roman commentarists’.

As we have come to know them, for the greater part of their ascendancy the Celts were a flamboyant collection of tribes with sophisticated metalworking, textiles, carpentry, complex religious and political institutions, and whose influence spread in a series of migratory waves throughout Europe into the British Isles westward (displacing — or subsuming — the extant Indo-European-devolved culture of Britain), south into Greece and Italy, and eastward into west-central Turkey, and possibly even as far as the Ukraine (Cunliffe, 1997 : 175-176). Philological evidence (Ross, 1986) indicates two waves of colonisation into the British Isles: an earlier movement of Goidelic-speaking peoples whose
language persists as the related insular tongues of Ireland, western Scotland, and at one time the Isle of Mann; and a later wave of Brittonic-speaking peoples, whose influence extended across southern and eastern Britain, and includes the Welsh and Cornish languages, as well as Breton in France.

One of these endemic Celtic influences concerns the balance of gender roles, and we have direct and indirect evidence that Celtic society featured one of the highest degrees of gender-equality found in the ancient world (James, 1993; Thompson, 1996; Cremin, 1997). Nevertheless, hard information is sufficiently sketchy that Cunliffe (1997: 109 - 110) could compile only a page or so of summary details concerning Celtic women based on the oft-quoted Roman sources (e.g., Caesar, Amianus Marcelinus), albeit with the now-standard caveat that we should “read between the lines” to work around latent elements of bias:

Women clearly occupied a more significant position in Celtic society than they did in the Graeco-Roman world and for this reason the classical sources give some prominence to observations about them, though in no systematic way. The Poseidonian tradition notes the beauty of Gallic women, describing them to be as tall and as strong as their husbands though the fourth-century Roman writer Ammianus Marcelinus, in a memorable piece of descriptive writing of the Celtic woman raised to anger, implies that as a fighter she is more than equal to the male. A tendency to promiscuity is noted. ‘They generally yield up their virginity to others and this they regard not as a disgrace, but rather think themselves slighted when someone refuses to accept their freely offered favours.’ (Diodorus Siculus. Hist. 5.32) To this, Caesar, writing of the Britons, adds that wives are shared between groups of ten or twelve men, especially between brothers, fathers and sons. Once more the literary references are likely to be ill-observed and misleading, content simply to convey an impression of ‘the barbarian.’ Behind this probably lies a complex structure of male-female relationships beyond the comprehension of monogamous Mediterraneans. Something of the intricacies of these bonds are preserved in the Irish vernacular literature. In the Tain Queen Medb is prepared to offer intercourse in the interests of friendship or gain without any sense of shame, while in the Old Irish Laws three grades of wife are recognized.

In Gaul, females had legal rights in marriage. A joint account was kept of the marriage wealth, composed of the bride’s dowry, an equal sum contributed by the husband, and any interest accruing. Whoever survived the marriage inherited the total. The equity of the arrangement must, however, have been somewhat diminished by the fact that the husband had the power of life or death over his wife and children and if husbands died in suspicious circumstances wives could be interrogated under torture. We owe this insight to Caesar without being able to test the veracity of his account or the extent of the practice.

Marriage provided an important means of social and cross-tribal bonding.
The Helvetian Orgetorix, for example, in attempting to consolidate his power base gave his own daughter in marriage to the Aeduan leader Dumnorix, while Dumnorix married his half-sister and other female relatives to prominent men in other tribes. A little earlier, the sister of the king of Noricum had been married to the German leader Ariovistus to cement a political alliance in the face of the Dacian advance. The use of the female relative, in the manner of a hostage bonded by marriage, was no doubt as widespread among the Celts as it was later to become among the royal households of Europe.

Women do not appear in positions of overt political power in Gaul at the time of Caesar’s campaigns, unless he chooses not to record the fact, but in Britain Cartimandua of the Brigantes and Boudica of the Iceni were potent leaders, and the large bulk of Boudica, her harsh voice, and the mass of red hair falling to her knees, resplendent in gold torc and bright cloak, remains a lasting image of Celtic female power. Whether we are looking at the aberrant behaviour of a social backwater in a time of unnatural stress or the survival of a phenomenon once more widespread throughout the Celtic world, it is difficult to say. The dominance of females in the Insular literature might, however, be thought to support the latter.

With regard to Celtic men having the right of death over their wives, James (1993: 66) makes the cogent point that “this may have been as theoretical as it had become among the Romans.” (This writer’s emphasis.) James (1993: 68) makes the further observation, “…Boudica and Cartimandua may not in fact be the clear examples they seem. Otherwise there is no known mention of female rulers among the various native British and Gallic chieftains, monarchs and magistrates of the late Iron Age.” This offers us the frustrating choice between assuming an incomplete record of female prominence or an accurate record of outstanding individuals, the Elizabeth Ists of the 1st c AD.

The truth may lie somewhere between these extremes. A further hint may be found in Tacitus’ Agricola, (Ch. 16) in which, appropos of the tribes of 1st c AD Britain, he comments: “there is no rule of distinction to exclude the female line from the throne or the command of armies.” Whether this is an assumption spurred by the Roman experience with the above-mentioned queens, or a formal custom amongst the Brittons, however, there is no direct evidence.

A parallel point concerns accountancy: if the Celts were an illiterate people, how did they keep exact records of the goods and moneys involved in marriage? Following their
contact with the Classical world it appears they utilized Greek and Latin (Caesar commented that the Druids of Gaul used the Greek alphabet to write in their own language, presumably phonetically (Thompson, 1996 : 10)), evidenced by the census of the Helviti, the inscription on the Manching sword, the Tablet of Lazare and the Coligny Calender; but these are isolated out-takes from the daily life of a widespread civilization, and there is at present no material indication of whether this official, military or religious use of Mediterranean languages extended down to domestic applications, or indeed if domestic record-keeping existed at all prior to contact with the Classical world (Megaw, pers. comm.).

Collis (1995 : 75) suggests the inscriptions found on Gaulish coins of the 1st c BC point to literacy at least amongst some classes. If domestic accountancy (and the legal onus it served) was a product of acculturation, it must represent one of the most significant shifts in social institution (or quantification of a preexisting structure) ever discovered. Perhaps the latter is more likely, that the legal status of women was largely unchanged from the pre-literate to the “opportunistically-literate” phase of Celtic culture, and the advent of foreign script merely fixed the details in a way that eliminated arguments when it came time to divide the assets of a terminated marriage.

The question remains, however, if Celts did keep mundane documentation in Greek, why do we have no surviving examples of what must have been millions of transactions committed to writing over several hundred years? Also, no specific reference to such common literacy is found in the foreign descriptive tracts.

Thompson’s (1996) conclusions from studying the Brehon laws are quite adversarial to those of Champion (1995 : 91-92):

The possibility of women holding positions of high status in their own right, rather than by virtue of their male relatives, seems to have varied. Some of the richest graves of the early Iron Age in central Europe were certainly the burials of women, and in the first century AD in Britain two women held power as queens over their tribes, Boudica of the Iceni and Cartimandua of the Brigantes. The picture given by early medieval Ireland, however, is very different. Neither the laws not the
Annals suggest that women were able to exercise political power, either in theory or in practice. They had no independent legal rights, but took their status from their fathers and husbands. The qualities valued in a woman were the traditional patriarchal ones of virtue, reticence and industry.

However, Champion caveats his own outlook (1995: 86):

Much of early Irish literature, including the law tracts, was the product of a highly educated clerical elite, well versed in classical and biblical scholarship, writing documents for the contemporary context, which should not therefore be taken as giving an accurate reflection of earlier society.

His reference for this was McCone, 1990.

This may be contrasted with Thompson’s outlook on the same documents (1996: 110), in which he explores their complexity, and, while citing their often ‘whimsical’-seeming nature, takes them seriously as a subject of study and a window upon the mind of a lost culture.

It is worth noting that Ross (1986) did not address women as a discrete, indexed topic, and though her volume is highly detailed and specific, inferences on the role of women must be gleaned from the text, as not even concerning the role of family in society is there any specific handling. Indeed, her review of Celtic religion compacts the female divine, so widespread in the Insular literature (which, paradoxically, she relies upon (perhaps too heavily) for examples throughout her text, and in relation to Celtic culture well removed from Ireland) into a little over a page (128-129). Time makes a difference, however, and just a decade later Koch and Carey (1995: 1) discussed the “Tablet of Lazarc,” an inscription in cursive Roman script on four lead sheets, found in a female inhumation dated to about AD 90, and which seems to be a rare physical record of ritual incantation for a “coven,” or other female religious circle. The same year, Ross again handled the subject with figurative tongs within the wider subject of Celtic religion in general, for Miranda Green’s The Celtic World (1995: 423-444).

Though to the Greeks and Romans they were the perfect ‘barbarians,’ there is much in
Celtic culture which we would today deem as- or more-sophisticated than the precepts of the Classical Mediterranean. Their skill at the forge earned the La Tene era smiths (post ca 500 BC) the name of “Ironmasters,” while the curvilinear designwork characteristic of Celtic art from this juncture onward comes down to us as one of the great artistic traditions of the world. Alongside this physical evidence, and the Celts’ wholehearted participation in warfare recorded in such enthusiastic, if sometimes questionable, detail by Roman journalists, we receive also their language (as noted above) in the form of the three branches of modern Gaelic, evolving from the closely-related Goidelic and Brythonic tongues of the Gauls. (Sub-branches have been plotted (Evans, 1995 : 10); Celts further east spoke the related language Lepontic, which may have featured a written form, the as-yet undeciphered “Lepontic Inscriptions” (Frey, 1995 : 515) )

The Celts are amongst the most “familiar” of the ancient nonliterate cultures, and the least-acculturated Indo-European society (Mallory, 1989). Their apparent descendants, the Irish, Scots and Welsh, have occupied a prominent role in recent and modern history, and preserved their own oral, later written, heritage that offers us a priceless glimpse into the ancient world. As popular interest in Celtic culture blossomed in the later 20th Century, an increasingly detailed picture developed of a Europe entirely distinct from and independent of the impact of classical culture for much of its history, a heritage whose importance should not be underestimated.

An Archaeological Perspective

The direct historical approach isolates common elements amongst what is known, whether artefactual or documentary, to establish “some definite knowledge of the particular culture type in operation on a certain date or within a definite time span.” (Hester, 1997 : 335) Excavation then seeks to project those quantities backward into what is not known, in the
hopes of generating a comprehensible picture. In other words, it pushes what we know of some attested culture into unattested times, and interprets the evidence within an assumptive frame of reference (Steward, 1942; O’Brien and Lyman, 2001). Steward’s brief but influential paper of 1942, formalising an approach used as early as 1915 (Steward, 1942: 337), stressed the power of this technique to unite archaeology and ethnography in blocking out the unknown areas of history. For instance (p 340), the direct historical approach revealed that the Plains Indians only became primarily bison hunters after they obtained the mobility of horsemanship, contrary to notions of an unbroken continuity of megafaunal hunting carried down from prehistoric times.

Clearly, however, the method should be used with caution. Hays-Gilpin and Whitley (1998: 5) said: “As in popular culture, archaeologists too have projected stereotypes from the present into the past, resulting in interpretations of archaeological data resting on unsupported assumptions about sex roles and gender identity.” Of course the Vix Princess was a paradox! In 1954, when R. P. Charles’ analysis of the skeleton was published (cited in Arn old, 1991: 370), the direct historical approach, based on prior interpretations of the material and documentary record, expected to find a chieftain or prince in such a tomb. Just as surely, the female warrior graves excavated in the Ukraine in 1863 and 1920 were casually ignored for the same reason as the squabbles over the Vix Princess: they defied an accepted model, they were controversial, and so long as they were unique it was easy to dismiss them as aberrations.

They are no longer unique. As the Bad-Cannstatt “female” weapon graves, and others, suggest, some sort of female warrior tradition in the west is hardly out of the question, though as Aedeen Cremin (1992) pointed out, and with this writers’ caveat of the observation being based on conventional logic which now may be substantially challenged, only the tiniest fraction of Celtic female inhumations contain weapons. But some 20% of Sarmatian
inhumations studied so far are female weapon graves (oddly enough, a comparable fraction, 10-20%, to the total of West Hallstatt weapon graves (Spindler, 1983, cited in Arnold, 1991: 370)), and in this we have physical evidence tying in with the general observations of Herodotus, that Sarmatian women hunted and fought on horseback with their menfolk. Not that he actually encountered the Sarmatians, his record was taken down second-hand at best.

Should Celtic cemeteries be reinvestigated from a less-biased viewpoint, the conclusion (that female skeletons associated with weapons are in the extreme minority) will likely be invalidated.

Witt (1997) states:

On the point of “Celtic” gender, archaeologists are notably influenced by neither the classical sources nor parallels in the archaeological record … Instead, their constructs of what a “Celtic” woman could or could not be override all other considerations. Thus, “Celtic” women “couldn’t possibly” be buried with weapons; ergo, even burials in which the skeleton is clearly anthropologically female are declared male.

There may in fact be many female weapon graves from Iron Age Europe already recorded, but expressly reclassified in the past to maintain a comfortable but narrow interpretation of ancient societies, and avoid their implications for modern culture.

The Scythians (see map p42)

This Iranian-speaking culture (Mallory, 1989: 48) arose on the steppes of Central Asia late in the Second Millennium BC, the descendants of countless generations of sedentary farmers who survived the severe winters in sheltered river valleys and pastured their herds on the plains in spring (Rolle, 1980). Somewhere around 1000 BC these plainsmen learned the skill of riding, and the entire steppe culture changed violently and radically. The mobility of the horse provided strength, and in the following centuries a largely consistent material culture becomes apparent from the lower reaches of the Danube in the west to the borders of China in
MAP #2 IRON AGE EURASIA AND THE TERRITORIES OF THE STEPPE PEOPLES

REPRODUCED COURTESY JEANNINE DAVIS-KIMBALL, CSEN, BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA
the east. This explosion of productivity is linked to exploitation of the horse, and the evolution of sophisticated archery as the primary means of combat. (It should be noted however, that linguistic evidence indicates the bow was already the primary weapon of the steppe cultures at the very base of the Bronze Age, ca 4th millennium BC, (Mallory, 1989 : 122), two millennia before archery appears in the inventory of the Bell Beaker people in the west.) (Briard, 1979 : 18). Direction of migration is predominantly east to west in this period, it is thought the Proto-Scythians moved into the Pontic Steppe from further east around this time (Melyukova, 1995 : 27, 31) though the general movement on the steppes also coincides with a severe drought (Davis-Kimball, pers. comm.) in the east. It has been postulated (Talbot-Rice, 1957 : 43; Taylor, 1994 : 380) that a domino effect occurred around 800 BC in response to a Chinese military excursion mounted by the Chou emperor Suan against marauding horsemen who had impinged upon China due to the climatic change affecting pasture. The expedition forced them to retreat into the territory of their western neighbours, who were forced into their neighbours, and so forth, the effect cascading across Central Asia until the Assyrians and Thracians felt the impact.

By the middle of the 1st millennium BC the Scythian culture reached its height in the Ukraine and came into contact, often peaceful, with Greek colonizers of the Black Sea shore (Boardman, 1980 : 251). The “Royal Scythians,” or Paralatae, as recorded by Herodotus (ca 460s BC), were a powerful and arrogant people who held in subjugation the three other, lesser, branches of Scythian culture, the farmers who provided tribute in the form of produce to their mobile, nomadic kings (Taylor, 1994 : 381). Scythian culture is rich in decorative metalworking, the so-called “animal style” is reminiscent of the themes and geometries of Celtic curvilinear design, and it is known Greek smiths from the Black Sea cities provided luxury goods to Scythian chiefs (Boardman 1980 : 259).

Women seem to have existed in a state of zanaan subservience, though it should be
remembered that Herodotus observed, or was told about through interpreters, only the upper echelon of Scythian culture, and the three lower, mainly agricultural, supporting castes may not have had the luxury of barring half the population from this task or that. Scythians were a polygynous race (Talbot-Rice, 1957: 60), and this model, in various forms, is commonly found throughout Eurasia to the present time. The tribes of Central Asia have long been Islamic, and men of social and economic position may marry additional wives (Davis-Kimball, 2002). The observations of Herodotus tally broadly with those of explorers into Central Asia in recent times, (e.g., the photographic expedition of S. M. Dudin to Kazakhstan in 1899 (Trippett, 1975: 143 - 153)) which suggests a remarkable continuity of culture, and stands in at least some paradox with the forty or so female warrior graves known from the region — if indeed they had belonged to the Scythian culture. The first group, in the region of Smela, southern Ukraine, were opened by Count Bobrinskoi in the 1860s, who according to Rolle (1989: 87) “was one of the first to apply anthropological classification.” Though initially deemed to belong to the Sauromatian culture, these individuals were later assessed to derive from later times and separate lineage. However, according to Rolle, more recent studies seem to confirm Bobrinskoi’s original thinking.

Rolle saw no significant paradox in these inhumations against the described and materially attested Scythian social order of the 4th century BC (1989: 86):

... the women’s area of responsibility ... involved horse rearing even more than it did in Greece. The women probably had a considerable quota of work to fulfill which demanded physical exertion on horseback. They were also entrusted with the safety of the herds and protection of the pasturelands when the menfolk were at war, wounded or dead. It is therefore not surprising to find descriptions of women who could defend themselves from attack, and of professional female warriors.

This viewpoint would parallel the role of women among the Hsiung-Nu in the far east (see below), but no elite female warrior graves are (yet) known from that culture.

On balance, the best-known examples of the Scythian female weapon graves (as
described by Rolle) bear strong resemblance to contemporaneous Sauro-Sarmatian inhumations, but pre-date the plentiful Sarmatian burials of the eastern Azov steppes (Moshkova, 1995a:87) by some two centuries.

Rolle describes Bobrinskoi’s initial discovery, the “centre burial in mound No. 20 on the Cholodny Yar on the left bank of the Tyasmin.” This was a 4th century BC 4.26m-diameter timber-roofed tumulus containing two skeletons, one definitely female with a full suite of characteristically female grave goods plus a suite of weapons, being knives, spear blades, quiver and (curiously short) arrows with trilobate Scythian points. The second skeleton’s sexing was doubtful, possibly male, and was interred on its side, laid crosswise at the feet of the other, with no status grave goods and no weapons. This individual may be a servant, a retainer, perhaps a relative, but there was no physical evidence of sacrifice to accompany the status individual to the grave. Melyukova (1995:53) speaks briefly of this grave as one of “a few unusual graves containing women [which] stand out conspicuously” because of their unusual votive suites. She describes the cultic/shamanic suite apparent in some of them, mentions arms and horse bridles, but omits to describe the prominent warrior suite of kurgan 20. She says, “Researchers believe these graves belonged to priestesses who belonged to the highest social stratum of horsemen.”

Another prime example is a comparatively shallow catacomb grave in “kurgan 16 of Akkermen I, in the Rayon Vasilevka,” which was unmolested and showed once again the full suite of female accouterments plus weapons, the latter including four lances, a quiver of arrows, and this time an armoured belt, fitted with iron plates to protect the loins on horseback. According to Rolle this is a peculiarly Scythian artefact, echoed by Sulimirski (1985:156). In both burials described here the lances and quivers were placed on the left side of the (principle) corpse, which is the opposite of the Sarmatian pattern found at Pokrovka (Davis-Kimball, pers. comm.). This latter may be significant, but whether it
necessarily denies an ethnic affiliation with the Sarmatians it is too early to say.

Women buried with weapons in Scythian territory are better-known than many texts might suggest. Melyukova (1995 : 43, 46) said:

Ordinary graves occupied by a female yielded various spindlewhorls and small decorations. Individual female graves also contained some pieces of armament. According to E. P. Buniyatyan’s calculations (1981, p. 16), about 27% to 29% of graves containing women found dating from the 4th through 3rd centuries B.C. contained armement... In the graves of noble Scythian women armament pieces are much rarer than in those of ordinary women. There was a sword that was found in a rich woman’s grave in the northern part of kurgan 22 at Volnaya Ukraina village.

This suggests weapons are fairly common in female peasant graves, though the tendency to assign them to votive status seems to remain, and as with so many instances of female weapon graves, few commentarists choose to mention them. The cultural schism between the writings of Herodotus and the concept of an armed female Scythian population remains pronounced; it is difficult to conceive of Herodotus having missed such a detail when he went to such pains to record what he was told of the Sarmatians, and the Sarmatian correspondences in the warrior/warrior-priestess burials in the Ukraine cannot be ignored. A functional explanation for the increase in female weapon graves amongst the ordinary Scythian people in the period mentioned may be that increasing pressures from the Sarmatians, culminating disastrously in the mid-3rd c BC, encouraged martial skills in a greater part of the population, though this is pure speculation at this point.

As long ago as the original German language edition of 1980, Rolle, apropos of kurgan 16, offers the cautionary note (1989 : 88):

This grave reinforced for archaeologists the vital importance of detailed anthropological classification. In the past, graves containing weapons, and especially heavy armour, had with few exceptions been assumed to be those of men.

One might perhaps at first presume that these weapons were placed in women’s graves — for some ritual reason unknown to us — without having been used by these women for hunting or in battle. But clear evidence of wounds — severe head injuries from blows and stabs, and a bent bronze arrowhead still embedded in the knee — contradicts this idea.

Taylor (1994 : 395) joins Rolle in seeing no explicit reason why these graves should not be Scythian, and, uniquely and significantly, cites the same assumptive gender bias as
operating in Scythian studies as exists in the European excavational regimen, thus reducing
confidence in existing models:

It is not clear to what extent the warrior role was acceptable for women outside the Scythian world. Herodotus himself was familiar with Artemisia of Halicarnassus as a warrior and war leader and he records that some Amyrgian Scythians were once lead into battle by ‘Atossa, daughter of Cyrus’, mother of Masistes by Darius. But the impression is that these women were exceptional, and that (perhaps) only steppe nomads would be prepared to fight under a woman as a matter of course.

Although often the subject of skepticism, the existence of women warriors in the steppes is archaeologically supportable. Excavators have not always paid proper attention to physical anthropological features as indices of sex. Most Scythian graves have been ascribed ‘male’ or ‘female’ on the basis of preconceived notions of the appropriateness of particular grave goods (for example, weapons for men, mirrors for women); nothing could be more unfortunate than this sort of a priori ascription in the case of the steppe groups. Exceptionally, mid-nineteenth-century excavations on the Terek river in the Caucasus uncovered and recognized the skeleton of a woman with armour, arrowheads, a discus of slate, and an iron knife, and a series of graves near Aul Stepan Zminda appear to have been of mounted female warriors (although later than the Scythian period in date). More recently, Renate Rolle’s excavations around the Scythian ‘royal’ kurgan of Chertomlyk (1981-6) have identified four from among fifty warrior graves as skeletally female: one was buried with an arrowhead in her back, another had a massive iron shield, and a third was buried with a young child. About forty such burials are now known in the Scythian region, west of the Don; east of the Don, in Herodotus’ Sauromatia, a full twenty percent of investigated fifth- and fourth-century BC buried warriors turn out to have been women.

However unusual the artefactual suites may be for the region, as Taylor points out they are far from unknown elsewhere. Jeannine Davis-Kimball (pers. comm.) comments:

The artifacts are virtually identical to those that we excavated from Sauromatian and Early Sarmatian burials. Orientation of one supine female is noted as east/west; this is typical of Early Sarmatian burials at Pokrovka. One difference is that spearheads are unknown east of the Urals. My supposition on this is that the Ural Sauro-Sarmatian burials are earlier and as these people migrated westward, they developed the spearhead slightly later. Both women mentioned by Rolle are typical “warrior-priestesses,” and of higher rank than the warrior woman. In Rolle’s book, we don’t have any craniometry or other evidence to go beyond that.

Barbarunova (1995 : 140) assumed the spear was a widespread weapon and its absence from graves in this period was of some cultic significance (a difficult association to interpret). Whatever their exact ethnic affiliation, female warrior graves in the Pontic Steppe region are comparatively rare. Conversely, there is ample evidence for
conferred-status female inhumation, with many extremely rich burials recorded, e.g., the “princess” in the “royal family” tomb of the Tolstaya mogila, at Ordzonikidze, opened in 1971. Sacrifice, both human and animal, accompanying high-status individuals into the afterlife, is more marked amongst the Scythians than other Steppe cultures, and especially greater than amongst the Celts. The classic late-Hallstatt to La Tene Celtic high status inhumations generally contain only the primary deceased plus votive offerings and possessions, while Scythian chieftains and kings would take servants, pets, a whole entourage to the next world with them, much as was the fashion for mass-entombment in ancient Sumer (Lamberg-Karlovsky and Sabloff, 1979), or, on a much smaller scale, amongst some Viking communities (Jesch, 1991 : 25). Wagon and chariot burials, whether functional or symbolic, are not uncommon on the Steppes, and it has been suggested that a “wagon driver” may at times be amongst sacrificed individuals. The question of personal status as a function of sex and/or class may be illuminated by these comments from Melyukova (1995 : 36):

> It is interesting to note that while both ordinary kurgans and larger kurgan embankments of Scythian nobility could be raised over graves of men and women alike and that the secondary graves of Scythian nobility could belong similarly to men and women, there was no single rich woman’s kurgan found without a secondary grave belonging to a male, infant, or teenager.

The overtone of sex as a determinant in social treatment remains evident despite status being high, which carries implications throughout the structure of Scythian society.

Though comparatively poorly-known, it seems the Scythians, like the Celts, built fixed fortifications. These gorodisce are located mainly in the forest-steppe region and over a hundred are known (Rolle, 1989 :117). Though some have been likened to late La Tene Celtic oppida, many seem more closely to resemble the forts of Hallstatt times, being primarily military defensive strongpoints, though some are so extensive that “township” seems an appropriate designation. The massive fortified enclosure at Bel’sk, above the river Vorskla, has been dated as early as the 7th century BC, with its latest levels around four
hundred years later. The scale of its construction dwarfs any other known work of the period: its outer rampart is 33km in length, encompasses eleven separate settlements, and the 72-hectare western fort, one of two on the wall, is considered the product of eleven million days’ work (Taylor, 1994: 389). That these forts existed does not imply that the Scythians had abandoned nomadism, but that they certainly appreciated the defensive and long-term benefits of a built environment.

Scythians are known to have developed a heavy-cavalry formation in which scale armour of intricate form was evolved. This type of fighting, increasing in utility in the later centuries of their tenure, directly equates to the military technology of the Parthians.

The Scythians declined in the later centuries of the first millennium BC, some nomadic groups or individuals giving up the steppes to settle in townships on essentially the Greek pattern (whose almost precognitive epitome is Herodotus’ account of the Scythian king Scylas who became so enamoured of Greek ways that he was eventually put to death by his own kin as a traitor to his kind), and much of their hereditary ferocity seems to have ameliorated so that when the Sarmatians crossed the Don River in 346 BC the traditional masters of the Ukraine were at least partially displaced westward, beyond the Dnieper River. The Sarmatians occupied the region effectively and the Scythians were forced into lower Danubia in the centuries that followed. The last traces of the living Scythian culture disappeared around the first century BC, but their lifestyle, that of the feudal, nomadic horse-archer, exploiting mobility and firepower, existed across most of the Old World, and was transmitted essentially unchanged to the heirs to their militaristic niche, the Huns, Tartars and Mongols.
The vigorous Sarmatian people from the lands east of the Black Sea were known to Herodotus, and some of his explicitly mythological references are almost certainly based on the emancipation and physicality of Sarmatian women, indeed they were proffered in explanation of them.

The Sarmatian culture appeared at a time level with the early La Tene phase in Europe and began to displace the earlier Sauromatian peoples. This materially and socially similar amalgam of tribes had inhabited the southern part of the Ural Mountains, and the Ural Steppe in the Volga and Don River regions, possibly as early as the 6th century BC (Davis-Kimball, 2002 : 9), and were culturally vigorous in the centuries after the advent of horsemanship in the region (nomadism had evolved certainly by 800 BC, as evidenced by bridle bits amongst grave goods, Davis-Kimball, pers. comm.), a demarcation that immediately suggests the culture took advantage of newfound power to expand their scope. The precise ethnic distinction between the two phases of Steppe culture in the region is as yet unclear, and Davis-Kimball has speculated (2002 : 32) that the second phase began with a gradual displacement of the earlier culture by breakaway groups from the culturally-similar Saka further east. See Barbarunova (1995 : 121) for a discussion of this process, as well as Sarmatian cultural movements westward.

The Sauro-Sarmatians were powerful nomadic peoples ranging between the Ukraine, east of the Don River, south to the Kuban and North Caucasus regions and east to the South Ural steppe, and while technologically and culturally equivalent to the Scythians, were quite distinct in being one of the group of cultures in which it seems a significant degree of equality existed between the sexes.

Davis-Kimball notes (1997/98 : 12):
One of the major differences between Scythians and Sauromatians was the position of women in their respective societies. The roles assumed by Sauromatian females, particularly from the southern Urals to the lower Volga River region, echoed the Amazonian legends. Mortuary offerings from these burials indicated that where there were women warriors it was women who performed the sacred rituals.

As early as 1985 Sulimirski (p190) was willing to encapsulate the same information in a single paragraph on Steppe tribes, albeit echoing old ideas about social evolution (see Chapter Five): “…Distinctly Sauromatian was the relatively large number of graves of armed women, which may be considered a survival of the ancient pre-Sauromatian social order based on a matriarchate, clear hints of which are found in Herodotus.”

In comparison, Hanks’ (2002) major discussion of the Sauro-Sarmatian world completely ignores the female warrior materials. He makes the obligatory mention of Herodotus, while cautioning against accepting anything at face value, and then — almost uniquely in the literature — likens the situation (re interpreting ethnicity from ancient documentary sources) to that encountered amongst similar investigations of ‘Celtic’ peoples in Europe, and stresses the fluidity and dynamism of “ethnic constructs.”

Women occupied a position of strength, were fully competent in the saddle and with weapons, hunting and fighting on a par with their male counterparts. It seems a law existed which forbade a woman to marry until she had acquitted herself in battle (Rolle, 1989). The vitality of their culture may be judged by their readiness to oust the Scythians, softened by centuries of contact with sedentary Greeks, from their ancestral lands between the Dneiper and the Don in the 3rd c BC. It appears the cultures shared amicable relations prior to 500 BC (Moshkova, 1995a : 86), which, given the polarisation of their attitudes to women, is curious and calls for examination. Over two hundred years later, the exiled Roman poet Ovid would write of the barbarian horsemen who ruled the North Pontic region, no longer Scythians by this time, but their tactical and technological equivalents.

Some 20% of warrior inhumations in the region to the east of the Black Sea contain
female remains, and the most common weapon is of course the bow.

The work of generations of Soviet archeologists (e.g., Rudenko, Smirnov, Moshkova, Akishev, Yablonsky) has illuminated the various peoples of Central Asia, and out of their extensive fieldwork came the first solid suggestions that the Western world-view may not be all-encompassing. K. F. Smirnov’s 1982 discussion of the Sarmatians of the lower Volga went further than Rolle’s work in ascribing matriarchy or a prominent female warrior elite (Davis-Kimball, 2002: 11) but was not available in English and remained largely ignored in the west. Davis-Kimball (2002: 13) says: “As I examined our archeological finds from Pokrovka, it became evident that the Sauromatians and Sarmatians were a variegated culture of Caucasoids in which women enjoyed a measure of power and prominence far beyond what previous researchers had ever imagined.”

The Sarmatians were the strongest entity in the Pontic region for centuries after first impacting the Scythians in 346 BC, their various tribal units (the Yazigs, the Rhoxolani, the Aorsi and the Siraki) controlling the Steppes from the estuary of the Danube to east of the Don River. These peoples were “assimilated into a new nomadic confederacy, the Alans,” (Davis-Kimball, 1997/98: 14) in the mid first century AD (though Moshkova (1995b: 149) urges caution in association of archaeological and documentary identities in this) and were themselves disrupted by the Huns in the 3rd century AD. Some Sarmo-Alan groups migrated west before (or perhaps with) the invaders, at last settling in western Europe where their culture was absorbed and vanished (Moshkova, 1995a: 89). Other groups survived the Hunnic passage and maintained a cultural continuity as late as medieval times in, e.g., North Caucasian Alania, and may have participated in the origin of the Slavic peoples (Moshkova, 1995c: 188).

The Romans certainly knew the strength of this fierce Steppe people: a Sarmatian legion was recruited in AD 175 and sent to fight in Britain, where, at the end of their military
service, which included a deployment to Gaul, the survivors of the 5000 Sarmatian warriors and their families settled at a retirement township in Lancashire (Davis-Kimball, 2002 : 32).

The Saka (see map p42)

Once grouped with the peoples simplistically termed the “Eastern Scythians,” this virtual confederacy of tribes occupied lands north and east of Bactria, at the feet of the Hindu Kush, butting onto the Altai Ranges and the lush pasturage of the Tien Shan Mountains in modern China, and their tenure spans the 8th to 3rd centuries BC (Davis-Kimball, 2002 : 9). They were of Europoid type, with an apparently recent Mongoloid admixture distinguishing them from the previous bronze Age population (Yablonsky 1995b : 214). Ancient Bactria, located in modern Iran, had an original population derived from Persian stock and in large part from “Scythian” settlers (Rawlinson, 1912), the Saka being the obvious vector of migration.

While the society technologically paralleled the Paralatae of the west, Saka women had come to occupy different social positions, including high religious office (in contrast with the shamanic Enarees, or “transvestite priest caste” of the Royal Scythians (Davis-Kimball, 2002; Rolle, 1989; Talbot-Rice, 1957)), which suggests a significant paradigm-shift in Steppe-culture moving eastward from the Ukraine. Female graves in the early Saka period could be more complex than male graves (Yablonsky 1995b : 201), and the regular cultic artefact suite is present in quantity, Yablonsky (1995b : 205) stating:

All of the bronze mirrors known in central Kazakhstan have come from female burials. Two are dated to the 7th-6th centuries B.C. Their closest analogies are found in the Saka kurgans in the Altai Mountains and in the lower Syr Darya River region. Almost all excavated cult items, including the oval-shaped, legless altars carved from sandstone, come from female burials.

Female military prowess is attested by ancient sources, Yablonsky (1995a : 194) comments: “Ctesias also reported the Saka wars against Cyrus and further commented that the Saka women fought together with the Saka men.”
The burial complexes at Pokrovka, Pazyryk, Issyk and many others (e.g., the southern Don River region, Tillya Tepe in Afghanistan, and as far west as Thrace) have yielded a large number of female inhumations, from a total of several thousand burials, though improper excavation and assessment mean solid statistics are likely to remain absent (Davis-Kimball, pers. comm.). Amongst these, several social stratae can be observed, including “hearth folk,” warriors, priestesses and warrior-priestesses. On European associated-artefactual sexing methodology all individuals except those of the first and third categories would have been deemed male due to the presence of weapons, and the spindle-whorls, mirrors and jewellery also found with many would have been considered anomalous, or ideological offerings. Many female graves belong to the first category, which we might deem “home-maker” interments (“women of the hearth” in Davis-Kimball’s terminology), which suggests that Saka society, like that of the Sarmatians, and probably the Celts as well, provided for a wide variability in roles accessible to both sexes.

Warrior graves are common, and several of those excavated at Pokrovka contained female skeletons (15% of \( n = 69 \) females, this total representing 35% of \( n = 174 \) individuals), the sex established by anthropometric means. They are accompanied by iron swords, shields, mostly bronze arrowheads, iron knives and items of horse tack (e.g., those from Tasmola I, Kurgan 19, Yablonsky 1995b : 203). (But for a single find at Filippovka, iron spearblades appear further west in the Don River region: the spear does not seem to have been a weapon of choice north of the Caspian Sea; Davis-Kimball, 1997/98: 10). From the Pokrovka cemeteries has come a further mystery, which some have considered an abstract suggestion of matriarchy, rather than of gender-equality: the grave goods accompanying some male skeletons (3% of \( n = 105 \) males) reflect domestic chores, and in some instances (a further 3%), the bodies of infants were interred with males. Unless the classic conservative position is taken, that the bimodal grave good suites characteristic of interment in this region are
purely idealistic, we have a physical culture in which male and female gender roles were at times polarised against the Mediterranean model. Exactly what this means is a subject for vigorous debate.

Davis-Kimball (2001) notes:

Male statuses were predominantly warriors. In addition there were a few very poor individuals without grave goods, and a few other males that had a child buried with them. No female burials at Pokrovka had a child in the burial. About one-third of the burials were children and except for those in male burials, all were buried alone in their own burial pit.

We might construe from this that the interment pairing of female and infant remains, which in at least some percentage of cases globally reflects death in childbirth, was either socially (perhaps religiously) proscribed in this culture, or death in childbirth was comparatively rare amongst the Saka, reflecting either sound medical practice, the biological benefits of an extremely fit female population, or both. A third possibility is that women who died in childbirth were interred/disposed of in places or ways which have not yet come to our attention.

The difficulty in separating off the weight of interpretive bias may be appreciated in the way reassessment has been necessary in many cases (see the Vix Princess and Issyk Warrior-Priestess cases studied in detail in Chapter Four.) Davis-Kimball (2002 : 11) comments: “Although he meticulously recorded the presence of women in the Pazyryk burials, Rudenko dismissed them as wives sacrificed to accompany their royal husbands to the next world, not women of power in their own right.” Horse-sacrifice explicitly accompanied the women also (Talbot-Rice, 1957 : 71). That their style of dress seems ill-suited to horsemanship may simply indicate these women were buried “in their finest,” rather than in hardy riding clothes, and thus, contrary to Talbot-Rice’s thinking, this does not constitute an argument in favour of those horses being a purely votive inclusion.
The Altai Tribes (see map p42)

The material culture of the Altai tribes is sufficiently on a par with the Scythians of the west that traditionally Russian scholars (Davis-Kimball, 1997/98) chose to dub them “kindred Scythians.” Indeed, when Rudenko excavated five kurgans at Pazyryk, in the northern Altai Mountains southwest of Krasnoyarsk in the 1950s, he was struck by the similarities between the material evidence and the accounts of Herodotus of the Scythians over 3000km away (Davis-Kimball, 1997/98). They are now considered part of the Saka Confederacy, and the statuses available to women in this assemblage are culturally identical to those of the peoples at Pokrovka, 2000km west across the steppes of Kazakhstan (Davis-Kimball, 2002: 73). Along with the Sauro-Sarmatians and Saka, they were almost certainly Indo-Iranian-speakers, according to Martin Schwartz, University of California, Berkeley, (Tocharian language group, itself philologically related to Italo-Celtic (Schmidt, 1990: 179-202; Thompson, 1996: 27) and Rudenko’s excavation of cold-mummified physical remains from the Altai tombs (see Rudenko, 1970: 7 for conditions of deposition) reveal a European or Caucasoid people, with a gradual infiltration of Mongoloid characteristics over time.

They flourished in the middle centuries of the first millennium BC (5th to 3rd centuries at Pazyryk, 6th to 2nd centuries overall), and were a characteristic steppe-nomad culture, their society founded on the horse and their economy based on pastoralism. They migrated between high and low altitudes during the year, and produced high quality wool, examples of which have survived in interments. In their summer pasturage areas they dug tumulus graves, lined with timber, over which were raised kurgan mounds, otherwise reminiscent of the Hallstatt cemeteries of Europe (tumulus graves are common in all the intervening lands), and interred the dead with grave goods. These were often rich, high-status goods, and include the earliest known use of wool for a carpet (Talbot-Rice, 1957: 141),
from Pazyryk (Mound 5). Embalming was practiced by the Altai tribes as well as by the Scythians, and the cold of the high Altai has preserved these “mummies” in better condition than any other remains from any steppe cultures. This includes material goods which commonly disintegrate elsewhere, as well as the bodies of horses (Mongolian ponies and highly-prized Ferghana warhorses) interred with high-status individuals. Horses were fully as important in the Altai as anywhere else on the steppes: the Tagar Culture of the Minusinsk Basin, which lies between the Altai and Sayan Ranges left behind numerous items of tack in burials, as well as many petroglyphs on equine themes (Bokovenko 1995d : 305).

High status individuals were of bigger stature, with longer limb bones, than low status people or indeed the westerners, which suggests a far better diet was available to the upper classes. This is also found elsewhere and strongly supports an image of a stratified society.

The region has a special significance: it’s name means “mountains of gold” and it has been suggested (Rolle, 1989 : 53) that much of the gold of which the western Scythians were so enamoured originated here. A caravan route from Greek Olbia, at the mouth of the Dneiper River, lead into Central Asia, and while there are no records of where its far end may have been, or the purpose for such lengthy and arduous expeditions, gold is an obvious assumption. And the Ferghana elite mounts of the Altai lords (see Chapter Six) were likely bought with gold from the local mines.

Female statuses amongst the Saka of the Altai is an assumptive point: Rudenko (1970) applied the conventional model of his day but the inclination now is to assign a similar set of available roles and status range to the Altai women as to lowland Saka. Only Jeannine Davis-Kimball has reevaluated the Altai materials for gender implications so far (Davis-Kimball, pers. Comm.) Indeed, Bokovenko (1995c : 285) described horse interments in the Altai and twice casually assigned the accompanying high-status individuals male: from the perspective of a decade later the conscientious worker feels obliged to verify sexing in all
cases before accepting a blanket definition.

**Far-Eastern Horse Tribes**

Furthest east we come to a group of horse-tribes that harried China, powerful, warlike nomads spoken of in the chronicles of the Han dynasty, and in response to whose depredations the Great Wall was built. Fragments of their languages have survived, suggesting Indo-European descent, cave art in the Tarim Basin depicts a Caucasoid stock (Davis-Kimball, 2002 : 149), and though thousands of kilometers separated them from the Celts of Europe or the tribes of the Pontic Steppe, at least some common cultural markers were still apparent. Beyond horsemanship, these included archery, the wearing of trousers, a love of gold, polytheism, and headhunting — the practice of hollowing out and gold-plating enemy skulls as drinking vessels, found amongst both Scythians and Celts, is recorded from the early 2nd century BC on the borders of China (Koch and Carey, 1995 : 30).

One difference, however, is that the “swathe of gender emancipation” seems to fade at the Altai Mountains. Though the tribes that were the bane of China (Hsiung Nu, Yueh Xi) embodied many of the same characteristics as the superficially kindred peoples scattered across the grasslands to the west, their gender role structures more resembled those of the Paralatae and Parthians, and the Chinese records do not reflect figures in which we may recognise the kind of warrior or cultic roles available to women amongst the Sarmatians and Saka. Nevertheless, Davis-Kimball (2002 : 65-66) describes an account by the historian Homer Dubs of a 6th c BC assault on a Hsiung-Nu fortification, in which the chieftain’s concubines fought defensively and stubbornly, even after their husband had fallen. We should bear in mind, this overview may be the bias of the Chinese chroniclers, however: would China at this early date be any more likely to acknowledge being ravaged by mounted females than would Rome?
The Direct Historical Approach: A Flawed Tool?

Any tool may be used to good or bad effect, and the Direct Historical Approach is no exception. Gender studies are an area of anthropology acutely affected by assumption, the assumption that relations between males and females are universal stereotypes (Conkey and Spector, 1984, cited in Hays-Gilpin and Whitley, 1998: 19-20). The present study proposes that this is self-evidently nonsense, and that a biased viewpoint is responsible for much misinterpretation of archeological information in the 19th and 20th centuries.

While the Direct Historical Approach is a valuable tool, its flaw is that it maps current assumptions — right or wrong — onto unknown times. The resulting data must always be treated tentatively. In his discussion of the method, Bruce Trigger (1989: 125) said:

> While the ‘flat’ past was advocated as a self-evident means for understanding archeological data, it depended on the assumption that prehistoric times were not qualitatively distinct from the ethnographic present... [T]his denial of cultural change, to no less a degree than the extreme unilinear evolutionism of European archeologists, subordinated archeological to ethnological research by suggesting that nothing could be learned from archeological data that could not be ascertained more easily by means of ethnographic research. While unifying anthropology, the ‘flat’ view also reinforced negative stereotypes of native peoples. As Meltzer (1983: 40) has noted, this view was ‘a predictable consequence of the government approach to archeological research... grounded in a subliminal and denigrating stereotype of the Native American.

If one substitutes “women” for “Native American” in the above passage (merely an alternate choice of second-class citizen) we may see that an anthropological outlook which assumes women always occupied the same social stratum that they do in our own culture reaches conclusions that are an equally ‘predictable consequence,’ and equally insubstantial. The assumption is worthless: it utilizes archeological and historic data for validation, while rejecting or suppressing contraindications contained therein.

Attitudes to women can easily be mapped onto attitudes to ethnicity. Trigger (1989: 164) comments that Kossinna’s Germanic supremacist interpretation of archeological data was fundamentally no different to the racist doctrine which underpinned much of the study of native cultures in North America, Africa and Australia. ‘In different ways archeology in each
region reflected racist attitudes that had become widespread in Western civilization in the course of the twentieth century.” The direct historical approach was being used to project contemporary attitudes to racial subordination into the past. This mechanism is hardly different to that which projects gender onto the blank canvas that is the social structure of extinct cultures, and doubly reinforces caution in the approach to ‘traditionalist’ views of extinct cultures laid down in the 19th century.

Trigger (1989: 376-377) intensively explored the impact of archeological analysis on perceptions of the human condition for different ethnicities and social groups in the present, as a consequence of their views of their antecedents:

there has been] a widening appreciation that a holistic knowledge of what has happened to specific groups of people in the past is a matter of great humanistic as well as scientific interest. Archeological studies have refuted the idea, sustained if not created by nineteenth-century anthropologists, that non-literate peoples were primitive and unchanging … the image of the ‘unchanging savage’ has been demonstrated, with the help of archeological data, to have been a myth that developed as part of the process of European colonization… By ignoring its social responsibilities, archeology may be dooming itself to irrelevance in the opinion of many people who otherwise might be interested in its findings, as well as encouraging needless hostility.

This humanistic outlook also reinforces the view that it is reasonable to employ a direct historical approach and to use non-archeological sources of data, such as oral traditions, historical linguistics, and comparative ethnography, in order to produce a more rounded picture of prehistoric cultures and to rule out alternative explanations that archeological data alone might not be able to exclude.

**Target Cultures: Discussion**

To what degree do the various nodes of Indo-European descendant populations preserve common characters from earlier social systems or groupings? This has long been a question of profound interest, and Mallory (1989: 110) speaks of it thus:

Traditionally, there have been two methods employed by indo-Europeanists to reconstruct Proto-Indo-European culture. One involves the straightforward comparison of the cultural traits or practices of the different Indo-European peoples in the hope that we can isolate common elements and project them back to the Proto-Indo-European period… [But] the entire logic of such an approach, at least when applied to the more obviously functional categories of culture, is certainly suspect.

We may take a familiar example by examining briefly how Indo-Europeanists have long observed similarities between the organization and behaviour of the war-
bands (\textit{Mannerbunde}) depicted in the histories and literature of various Indo-European peoples. Here we find, from India to Germany and Ireland, a series of recurrent motifs in the organization of these warrior sodalities — egalitarian structure, frenzied berserker-like behaviour in war and sometimes in peace, the use of wild animals such as wolves as totems, and a tendency to operate outside the normal jurisdiction of society which often leads to conflicts between the warriors and the formal political and religious élites of the community.

This is the Direct Historical Approach, and it has the comfort and confidence of being a straightforward, understandable means of projecting what is not known from what is — an argument by analogy. But the foregoing is both testament and warning: \textit{yes}, there are fairly prominent similarities, but they may be driven by a conflux of circumstances arising naturally in each descendent population. The responses to these forces are thus unlikely to be some factor of common descent.

Mallory (1989), however, for all his caution, joins Diakonoff in advancing a certain assumption that is so basic to language itself as to be almost transparent, and selectively convenient in terms of the classic outlook:

\begin{quote}
\ldots if the warrior sodalities constituted a formal segment of Proto-Indo-European society, this might well be translated into certain archaeological expectations such as the systematic deposition of weapons with the burials of young males.
\end{quote}

And from Diakonoff (1990: 55):

\begin{quote}
\ldots The mountain passes across the Greater Caucasus although accessible to groups of pedestrians, or of riders without women (like the Cimmerians and the Alani), were not suited for crossing in wagons on primitive wheels, with families and household goods.
\end{quote}

These statements are presented as generalities for the behaviour and structure of cultural groupings in extreme antiquity across large and fairly inspecific regions of Eurasia. Though the linguists would contend that little evidence exists for gender equality or any mode of gender relations differing from broad orthodoxy (with perhaps the exception of the absence of grammatical gender in the early Armenian language (Diakonoff, 1990: 65), occurring in response to overlying a Hurro-Urartian substrate, which may also tell us things about gender in Hurrian and Urartian societies) their evidence is at odds with the
archaeological materials from the female warrior graves of the Ukraine, the Ural Steppe and elsewhere. Amongst the Saka materials (~4th c BC, some centuries postdating the demise of the above-mentioned Cimmeri) is the skeleton of a girl aged around 14 years, whose thigh bones have been assumed to display a deformation caused by spending long periods in the saddle during her formative period, however this is by no means established and thorough osteological work is needed to fix musculoskeletal markers for this activity (Murphy, pers. comm.). This work is proceeding, Courtaud and Rajev studied the markers associated with horse riding (and battle) as early as 1997 (Hanks, 2002 : 194-195). If the assumption should prove correct, then in no sense was this person a member of a culture whose women would have difficulty transiting high passes on horseback, or be socially prohibited from doing so, and the weapons in the South Ural tumuli run the full gamut from bow to sword and apply to both sexes. And, to apply the coup de grace to Diakonoff’s pedantry, Davis-Kimball (2002 : 66) comments in passing:

When the Sarmatians were pushed westward by the Huns, in the fifth century, for example, many settled in the mountainous valleys of northern Spain, as Alans…

Thus the caution is doubly underlined: one cannot afford to assume anything.

Though the Indo-European assemblage also gave rise to the Mediterranean world — the Greeks through the early Mycenaean civilisation and the Dorian invasion early in the first millennium BC, and the Roman world in hand-down from the Etruscan state that evolved in parallel and contrast to the Greeks — we may also see that the microcosm of the warm-temperate shore was a social arena in which a great many driving forces conspired to shape civilisation as they did, while other forces, or other decisions, gave rise to other modes of being in other places.

The Alps were the Great Divide of the continent. To the literate, warmth-loving citizen of perhaps a Greek colony city around 550 BC, the lands stretching away northward were a world in which everything familiar was absent. Over those mountains were dark
forests, cold rivers, a world of rain and snow where bears, deer, wolves and boar roamed, and the people were entirely alien. Their physical stature was different, as was their colouring, their speech, their modes of dress and decoration, the things they valued and the attitudes they held to life, death, war, the past and the future.

To the cultured Greeks the Keltoi were the barbaroi, and Aristotle (paraphrasing) classified them as “other than Greek, therefore barbarian.” He might have been scandalised to learn that today’s linguists can link his precious Hellenic speech with the “bar-bar” utterances of those very barbarians convincingly enough to classify them as different, though ultimately related, stems of the same Indo-European rootstock language (Mallory, 1989: 108).

The Celts may have absorbed at least some of their horsemanship through acculturation: it has been broadly supported by Cunliffe (1997: 45, 47-48) that contact between the eastern Celts in early Hallstatt times with the Paralatae spun off the horsemanship that was a Celtic signature ever after, along with possibly a suite of other cultural markers (e.g., headhunting), though more work is needed in this area before we can be sure of such a monumental shift in any society. To wit, Zimmer (1990: 336), and in references to aligning the material record with both linguistic and mythological sources, comments: “The custom of headhunting … is known from Gaulish sanctuaries (e.g. La Roquerpertuse), from Caesar’s writings and from Old Irish saga texts. I see no possibility of forming any hypothesis on the where and when of this custom’s origin.”

Significantly, Cunliffe (1997: 44) also points out that horsemanship in the west in fact pre-dated the cusp, appearing in Hallstatt B2 Late Bronze Age materials of the affluent Urnfield culture, representing horses for both draught and riding uses. This is equivalent in date to the appearance of Cimmerian bronze horsetack on the Great Hungarian Plain (Cunliffe, 1997: 47). By its nature, the plain of Hungary is an “island of steppe” (Taylor’s term) ringed by mountains, and attracted eastern settlers: e.g., skeletal materials at
Szentlőrinc are considered of Pontic type. While horsemanship as such was already established at this time in Europe, it seems likely an acculturative phase transmitted superior mounts and technology to the Urnfield peoples well before they physically encountered the Paralatae. Taylor (1994: 383) comments: “... animal bone studies show that Scythian riding horses were being traded into Europe (to the head of the Adriatic) by middlemen at this time; the availability of Steppe equipment may have encouraged the local emergence of martial elites in particular areas.”

That some Celtic communication eastward occurred is certain, Hallstatt pottery was found in western Russia in 1910, more in the Kiev region, and Count Bobrinskoii recovered La Tene materials along the Dneiper River (Talbot-Rice, 1957: 189), but, strictly, where and when (or even if) Celts may have absorbed the Scyths’ signatory enthusiasm for horsemanship remains unclear.

During the middle centuries of the First Millennium BC, in the eastern reaches of the “sea of grass,” and the mountains of Mongolia, horsemanship, love of warfare and physical luxury were at least as pronounced as by the rivers of Gaul. 6000km and the territories of innumerable kingdoms separated peoples who were conjoined in many cultural facets, and by the echo of their mother-tongue. Though a Celt may have been puzzled by the glorification of the bow, a weapon which “[went] out of fashion” in later Urnfield times (Powell, 1980: 103) and which the Celts did not embrace for warfare once more until the later La Tene era (Ritchie and Ritchie, 1995: 53; Cunliffe, 1997: 94), the Dürrnberg bow notwithstanding, (and possibly for ritual execution, as mentioned by Strabo (Koch and Carey, 1995: 18)), he or she would have instantly understood the power and flexibility of cavalry. Nor would a Celt have been puzzled by the fact the Saka women, like those of the Sarmatians, took the field of battle with bow, horse and sword, for as late as the 7th century AD ban-gal (“woman’s battle-fury”) was a living term in Gaelic: it was not until AD 697 that the early church
succeeded in outlawing military service for women in Ireland (Thompson, 1996: 71).

The Saka and Sauro-Sarmatians speak strongly to us of this social format, and the warrior graves of Pokrovka are physical evidence for the kind of things recorded by the Brehon Laws of Ireland, and of which Roman scholars speak in what sound like difficult, culture-shocked terms. If one can lay aside the notion of abstract offerings they become totally unambiguous, the question of ascribed-status grave goods becomes irrelevant, as does transvestitism, *ala* the wrangle over the Vix Princess (what Witt, (1997) called “truly bizarre reconstructions”), forty years ago. These are warrior women, and remains show evidence of death in battle, *e.g.*, the bronze arrowhead within the thoracic cavity of the skeleton occupying Pokrovka Cemetery 2, Kurgan 7, Burial 2 (Davis-Kimball, pers. comm.)

Either the warrior women of Ireland, Britain, Gaul, by implication possibly Germany and Hungary, plus the Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, Bactria (perhaps), Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Mongolia were social aberrations in a patriarchal world, *or* they represent an identifiable, understandable order of being. *All* belonged to warlike, iron-forging, gold-loving, horse-using, polytheistic, mainly illiterate peoples who shared a language stem, but whether these conditions constitute descendant Indo-European character states or individual responses to similar social pressures is an open question. The verity of the material evidence, in conflict with the linguistic, and our interpretation of them both, is however a more tangible problem.

What we, in our culture, make of this, how we choose to integrate this information into our world view, is one focus of this study.

The methodology enabling this analysis includes a comparative study of both material record and ancient documentation. The sample groups are the cultures introduced above, featuring detailed examination of the high-status tombs of Vix and Issyk, with reference to other significant exhumations, *e.g.*, Stuttgart Bad-Cannstatt (Graves 1 & 2), Pazyryk (5),
Pokrovka (2-7-2) and others, focusing on the social roles of women, determined by skeletal morphological data, associated grave goods, contemporary written accounts and modern anthropological and ethnographic inference. The primary investigation is the determination of sex by purely anthropometric techniques, in light of which associated grave goods can then be examined for variability between males and females, between adults and subadults, and to allow for speculation distinguishing their presence in a grave as due to inherited/ascribed or achieved status, and the overall implications for gender roles. Horsemanship is evaluated in light of the foregoing as a possibly consequential attendant factor.

The following chapter begins this process with an examination of ancient literary and artistic sources relevant to the target cultures. Problems and biases in interpretation of ancient sources are considered, the biases of both ancient authors and their modern translators. Specific archeological finds are used in context to illustrate some cases, and the negative influence of deeply-ingrained mythological imagery is examined.
Chapter Three:
Ancient Evidence

The interpretation of ancient documents is never straightforward, if for no other reason than that the speaker is speaking from the vantage of his own culture, a frame of reference to which we do not have direct access. We may read the words, but their implications may not be clear. Shakespeare’s England was just four centuries ago, but language and society have “drifted” and at times Shakespeare is far from easy to follow.

As noted previously, when considering documents from extinct cultures this problem is magnified considerably. Social attitudes and assumptions change, and there are problems establishing reliable gender roles. Even the most familiar of ancient civilizations, e.g., Rome, while being inarguably the father-culture of modern Western civilisation, is not merely “a mirror-image with high technology omitted.”

Dyson (1981) cited in Britton (1997) put it thus:

Many texts are tendentious or irrelevant. Material such as the inscriptions represents a sporadic survival that would horrify any student of sampling laws. At times I think we can know more about the Mayans, where we realise our ignorance, then about the Romans, where we do not.

Thompson (1996: 19) adds:

The modern notion of “academic honesty” was notably absent in the Classical Graeco-Roman world. Ancient authors often freely plagiarized earlier works. Unfortunately, because of the loss of source materials, separating popularized stereotypes from historical fact is extremely difficult.

Thus, making an objective assessment can be a minefield process, and it is often easy to see the bias of the historical archeologist emergent in the conclusions offered. It has been strongly argued (e.g., Hills, 1997) that historical and archeological research are at their most valuable and productive when they operate in support of each other, not in some territorial dispute as to who has the superior claim to make pronouncements about the past.
This chapter will consider a sampling of ancient texts relevant to sex and gender roles amongst the peoples in question, and look at the material record in concert to survey for areas of agreement or conflict.

The Celts

An excellent source-compilation for classical and other references to Celtic culture is Koch and Carey (1995), a volume bringing together quotations from ancient literature by subject and theme, some of which are freshly translated by the authors. Most quotes in this section derive from this work.

Roman and Greek sources are not always easily understandable, nor can they always be fitted into an overall comprehensive pattern, and it is crucially important to keep originating bias in mind when considering such testimony. Consider the following comments from Aristotle (384-322 BC), expounding his views on why he felt that female liberation lead to the downfall of state and culture (Politics 2/IX):

The inevitable result is that in such a state wealth is esteemed too highly, especially if the men are dominated by women as it is with most military and warlike cultures, except the Celts and certain other groups who openly approve of sexual relations between men.

This passage cries out for deconstruction: 4th century BC Athens was a focus of extreme female repression (see Chapter Five), and Aristotle seems to be saying that Celts (of the rich early La Tene period), due to common approval of homosexuality, avoid a situation of the irrational prizing of wealth, a situation he associates with the domination of men by women. We may infer, from comments in the same passage, the domination of the male outlook by an obsessive lust for women (as opposed to a situation of matriarchy or other genuine female social power, which Strabo hints at as a characteristic trait of “barbarian peoples,” in violent contrast to Aristotle (Politics 1/II) who sees barbarians, females and slaves as natural equals and spends much of that work justifying the “normality” of strongly
hierarchical society), such as would correspond to the common image of warlike or barbarous cultures — a nuance lost in translation, perhaps. Diodorus Siculus broadly supports this view insofar as homosexuality is concerned. Yet it runs counter to many another reference, and especially to the Insular literature, which broadly glories in heterosexual profligacy. The relationship between wealth and the realistic or unrealistic value placed on luxury, and sexual proclivity, is difficult to identify, and the temptation is to group these passages with others by Diodorus Siculus, for whom the barbarity and depravity of non-Classical peoples intensified the further from the Mediterranean one went, until, by the time one reached Ireland, cannibalism was an accepted custom (Chapman, 1992). (Strabo echoes this and describes cannibalism in the Derbikes people of the Caucasus region, but with the twist of sexually dimorphic rites — old men were killed and consumed, while old women were strangled and buried (Murphy and Mallory, 2000: 389)). Aristotle, it seems, is, like Diodorus, tarring the rest of the world with the same broad brush, and conveniently ignoring the social norm homosexuality represented in Sparta, comparatively recently to his own writings, while ascribing virtue to the decoupling of value from mere material wealth (“spartan” in its common vernacular usage.)

It is worth noting that Diodorus makes perhaps the most extreme claims for Celtic barbarity, cruelty and depravity, though Strabo echoes them, and it has been theorised (Koch and Carey, 1995: 19) that each is relying on the much earlier writings of Poseidonius (ca 200 BC) to some unknown extent, thus likely perpetuating at least some prejudices and/or inaccuracies. Strabo is the only writer other than Caesar who describes the infamous (and materially unsupported) “wickerman.” This may be contrasted with his generalising comment: “The whole race … is warlike, both spirited and quick to go to war, but otherwise simple and not malicious.” Diodorus also describes ritual immolation, though without an anthropomorphistic structure.
Caesar, for his part, ignored the role of women in mid-1st c BC Gaul except to express a servitude and status approaching that of slave, and to reinforce barbarity with accounts of funerary immolation equivalent to the Indian practice of *sutti*. This also is materially unattested, and inhumation burial is the standard for the period and region of the Gallic Wars.

With regard to immolation practice, though fire played an important role in pagan Celtic ritual, it is unclear whether immolation *per se* was standard (as the Romans would have us believe) or if indeed it was the ritual cremation of the remains of slaughtered and butchered animals at seasonal feasting. Anne Ross states (1995: 439):

> There can be little doubt that animal sacrifice took place in Ireland at the great assemblies, as did human sacrifice. At the druidic site of Uisnech, traces of the Beltain sacrifices have been found. At the centre of the enclosure on the top of the hill a large bed of ashes was exposed, relics of a series of fires, and charred skeletons of animals were found among them.

Her reference is Macalister’s *Tara*, 1931. The point to this sidebar is that there are to date no attested mass concentrations of charred human remains, whether from the Continent or the British Isles, associated possibly with animal remains, and a significant carbonised deposit to indicate a large fire, in the kind of configuration that would support the notion of either the “wickerman” (which Ross seems to accept at face value) or other forms of pyre. Such a massive structure would also probably have left easily recognisable supporting beams or foundations in the ground. Had the immolation ritual been as widespread as both Roman sources and some modern scholars apparently believe, the probability of it being supported with material evidence by this time is high. In the absence of that evidence, the “records” must remain caveat to the appearance of such tangible proof.

The point to this digression is that if “testimony” can be as pointedly inaccurate or politically manipulative as the issue of barbarous practice may illustrate, references to gender roles must be viewed with at least as much skepticism.
After quoting Plutarch’s description of the last stand of the Helvetii, in which women and children fought to the death alongside their menfolk, Thompson (1996: 55) goes on:

Julius Caesar … never mentions a single Gaulic female warrior in any of his writings. The simplest explanation for Caesar’s silence is that, like kingship, female warriors were an old Celtic custom that had already died out in Gaul. It is extremely curious, however, that Caesar is equally silent about female warriors in Britain. Again, one could argue that the more sophisticated Belgic tribes he encountered had also abandoned the practice, but the argument begins to wear thin. A century later, the Romans were acutely aware that British warrior-queens were facts and not fictions.

**Celtic Artworks**

The art of the Celts has been the subject of considerable scholarly attention, and while early work explored for evolution of form to provide a chronology or typological index over time, no such synthesis has been possible. Paul Jacobstahl’s great survey (1944) was the benchmark until publication of Megaw & Megaw (1989, revised 2001). Of necessity, any brief commentary is superficial, and here seeks only the thread of gender in human representation.

Celtic Art in its unique sense is not a strictly representational form. The pure forms (“vegetal” and “curvilinear”) are abstractions that seem to evoke the ethereal and intangible in two-dimensional form, and it is not until the later centuries BC that we start to find Celtic statuary in a representational light — post-contact with Greek and later Roman influences. Therefore it is almost impossible to make any kind of judgement concerning gender based on surviving “pure” artworks from the pre-Roman period. Figures are comparatively rare, and only a handful of statues, often clearly male, are known (ranging from the 6th to the 3rd centuries BC; Green, in Green, 1995: 466) A prime example is the conical-hat or -helmeted figure originally surmounting (it is assumed) the barrow at Hirschlanden (Zürn, 1964; Megaw and Megaw, 2001: 45), commonly interpreted as either a representation of the interred warrior, or his patron god.
Clearly male (though strongly stylised) faces are more common, e.g. the 2nd - 3rd c BC ragstone head from Mšecké Zehrovice, in the region of Prague, which Green (1995 : 467) interprets, perhaps controversially, as a deity, this echoed by Cunliffe (1997 : 128) though Megaw and Megaw (2001 : 124) offer no such judgement and discuss its merits as a stylistic self-portrait of mortal man. The human face, in progressively more and more abstract form is a recurring theme over centuries, but stylisation is so pronounced as to go far beyond any hope of inferring gender (other than when moustaches may be seen). Sometimes even human identity is so ephemeral the style has become known as ‘Cheshire cat.’

Female figures are known, but few are properly representational. The three bronze ca 1st c AD “Dancing Girls” from the Neuvy-en-Sullias trove found near the Loire in 1861 (Megaw and Megaw, 2001 : 172) have been interpreted also as priestesses engaged in a rite, or at least temple-dancers, again emphasising perhaps more a cultic-origin obsession in the beholder than anything the physical evidence might really suggest. The famous 7th century BC bronze model of a cart from Strettweg in Austria features a stylised female giant, usually interpreted as a goddess, looming over horse-warriors and other naked figures (Cremin, 1997 : 129; Megaw and Megaw, 2001 : 33-34) Many assumedly divine figures are associated with the much later latinizing influence, females often identified with Minerva (following Caesar), though in an expanded, Celticised meaning (Ross, in Green, 1995, : 436),

The single most superbly representational female figure from the Celtic opus is probably a carved oak figure amongst the 190 or so items recovered from the votive deposits at the source of the Seine, Cote d’Or, France (Ross, 1986 : 117; Champion, 1995 : 83; Megaw and Megaw 2001 : 172) where a place sacred to Sequana, goddess of healing, was located in La Tene times. The 1st c. AD Roman artistic influence is indisputable, but this is hardly a portrait of a Roman. She stands straight, wears a flowing robe, her hair is worn long and brushed back, with a device that might be interpreted as a headband or a hood, and she wears a buffer-terminal torc. The impression is of a Ban-Drui, though the figure may also represent
Of the entire opus of Celtic art, perhaps only this statue, recovered amongst the votive deposit at the headwaters of the Seine, is truly representational. While the influence of Roman statuary is undeniable, this is an artwork from “barbarian” Europe, a portrait of a Gaulish girl. Whether interpreted as goddess, priestess or woman, there can be no doubt we are seeing an Iron Age person through the eyes of an Iron Age artist.
Sequana. It is also entirely possible the statue is representational of a person who had fallen ill. Her level gaze, from only gently stylised eyes, over a firm, fine mouth and precisely-carved facial planes, stare at the beholder across two thousand years, and one sees an individual, not an abstraction. Other examples are less representational, but clearly depict women.

If the question is, were women represented in Celtic art, the answer must be, according to traditional wisdom, essentially no. Unless our interpretation is askew, embodying a scholarly fixation on a religious origin for all objects devoid of mundane function, the ordinary woman does not seem to be worth immortalisation in wood, stone or metal. Goddesses are carved, priestesses perhaps, temple-dancers have been suggested, but women do not seem to appear in the record divorced from a spiritual context.

This begs the question: is it an accurate assessment in line with orthodox assumptions concerning the status of Iron Age women, or is our interpretation of every instance of female representation coloured by that prior assumption, and thus merely circular logic?

Yet, if the ordinary Celtic woman is not a subject for artistic depiction, is the ordinary Celtic man? Interestingly, statues or bas reliefs from later times are again interpreted as warrior-heroes, gods or kings (Cunliffe, 1997 : 125), so the absence of “ordinary folk” of either sex from the artistic opus may be interpreted as a class/status factor, rather than having anything to do with sex/gender. This may be compared to the Scythian opus (below) in which entirely ordinary men are depicted, but almost never women, whether ordinary or otherwise.

Less artwork than religious symbolism is the “shrine of skulls” from Roquepertuse, and the column of Entremont, in France, where a large number of skulls are interred in carved niches. The “cult of the head” (Cunliffe, 1997 : 127) reaches perhaps its most sophisticated expression in these columns. The skulls have been interpreted as the heads of young warriors who fell in battle, but anthropometric analysis may return surprising data. For
instance, Thompson (1996 : 54) describes another ‘skull trove,’ a deposit of 17 skulls found with Roman-era materials at Wookey Hole Cave, Somerset. The skulls have been assumed to be war trophies, and “given that two of the seventeen skulls were females’, women were apparently still considered worthy opponents in the Roman province of Britain.” He goes on to footnote (p 74) the passage: “A systematic evaluation of the sex ratio of the Celtic skulls stashed away in various collections would provide invaluable information about the status of women warriors.” In this, Thompson joins Arnold, Effros, Witt and others in calling for a fresh diagnostic study of existing materials.

*Herodotus: Histories — Melpomene & Euterpe*

In the 5th century BC, Herodotus of Halicarnassus traveled widely and wrote detailed accounts of the countries he visited. Called by some the “Father of History,” he is also dismissed by others (e.g., Thucydides) as the “Father of Liars” (Taylor, 1994 : 374). Some of the things he committed to prose were unpalatable to his contemporaries, or simply failed to suspend disbelief, which is not quite the same thing.

He was not the only ethnographer: some decades after his travels another Greek visited the Steppes and committed his observations to writing. This writer’s real identity is not known, and he is referred to as “Pseudo-Hippocrates.” We do know he was a doctor and many of his observations are from this perspective. His work broadly supported Herodotus but is far more biased, as the infusion of his personal disgust for the indigenous peoples heavily affects his narrative in ways clearly contradictory of physical evidence, e.g. anthropometric and artistic evidence (Rolle, 1989 : 54). Ovid, at the beginning of the 1st c AD, and Dion Chrysostomos of Bythinia, at its end, are our only other first-hand witnesses to the North Pontic region.

During his journeys, Herodotus visited some of the peoples under consideration in
this study, notably the Scythians ("Melpomene") and also Egypt ("Euterpe"), wherein his observations serve a comparative role.

As mentioned in the introduction, Herodotus was by no means infallible, and had difficulty interpreting the things he saw. It is believed he conversed through interpreters, that he never learned a language other than Greek, though Greek took him relatively as far and wide in his day as English takes people today. However, when doubtful of some story or claim he usually says so, and it is this writers’ opinion that he honestly recorded his perceptions. It remains for us to evaluate from our broader knowledge base the implications of the things of which he wrote. This is not always difficult: when evaluating the three stories of the origin of the Scythian people, he rejects the mythological accounts of both the Scythians themselves and the Greeks, and opts for the following (IV : 12):

Besides the story which the Greeks of Pontus tell, there is another which I myself consider the most likely of the three. This relates how the nomadic tribes of Scythians who lived in Asia, being hard pressed by the Massagetae, were forced across the Araxes into Cimmeria (what is now Scythia is said to have once been inhabited by Cimmerians.)

This is totally mechanistic, without reference to gods or heroes, and reflects the cascade effect of tribal movement known to have occurred across the Steppes (Sulimirski, 1985 : 169; Taylor, 1994 : 381). Unwittingly, perhaps, or in accordance with human common sense, Herodotus was following “Okham’s Razor,” offering a functional argument as the simplest and most reasonable explanation. There are other instances of this in his text.

Another anecdote which seems especially important, Herodotus speaks of a race far to the east named the Issedones (“a Saka tribe who lived near Lop-Nur, the now-dry lake bed in the eastern Taklamakan desert”; Davis-Kimball (2002 : 109)), of whom, when he puts aside hearsay, he says: “… the Issedones appear to have a sound enough sense of the difference between right and wrong, and a remarkable thing about them is that men and women have equal authority.” (IV/27; de Selincourt, 1954 : 279) In light of the discoveries concerning
Saka society and the roles of women in the further Steppe communities, this statement, based on communicated accounts, may be comfortably accepted. Interestingly, George Rawlinson’s 1858 translation (1910 edition, and long before independent revelations concerning the Saka) footnotes this passage (p297) with a supportive comparison: “... among the Nairs of Malabar the institutions all incline toward a gynocracy, each woman having several husbands, and property passing through the female line in preference to the male.”

**Scythia**

Where the Scythians are concerned, Herodotus is always the first reference. He was the first literate scholar of the immediate pre-classical period to visit the Pontic Steppe and make what today we would call anthropological and ethnographic observations. Greek colonialism was long-established in the east, the thriving port city of Olbia, at the estuaries of the Bug (ancient Hypanis) and Dneiper Rivers (ancient Borysthenes) exported Ukrainian grain to Athens and existed in a state of uneasy but generally peaceful trade with the Paralatae (Boardman, 1980: 251; Rolle, 1989: 13-14). This fostered an environment in which a wandering scholar could undertake with a fair degree of safety an expedition we might term sociological tourism.

His observations have been reiterated many times in academic and lay texts, and an in-depth repetition is unnecessary here. Germene to this study are his observations of women under the Paralatae.

Unfortunately, Herodotus wrote almost nothing of Seythian woman, the standard modern translation (de Selincourt, 1954) containing only the odd frustrating comment — their habit of giving themselves a skin treatment with a perfumed ochre paste; their interbreeding with slaves while the warrior males spent 28 years away waging war; their exemption from the death by fire that awaited all male relatives of a false-saying prophet; the
“Amazons” quoted adamance that their own lifestyle was incompatible with expectations for normative female behaviour amongst the Scythians; and their transport in wagons during transhumance. There is essentially no more, and comparison with the prior standard translation (Rawlinson, 1858) suggests no omissions have been made. Sulimirski (1985:154) in the course of a fifty-page essay on Scythian culture can say of women only: “Scythian women apparently enjoyed no emancipation.” He then very briefly contrasts them with Sarmatian women. Taylor (1994:391) can say no more: “Thracian and Scythian women seem to have been politically subordinate to men.”

A closer look is warranted at Herodotus’ account of the period of, reputedly, twenty-eight years when the Scythian mobile warrior sodality pursued the Cimmeri, took a wrong turn and ended up battling the Medes in Iran before making their way home. Their womenfolk had interbred with their male slaves and the offspring were ready to do battle to keep out the menfolk on their return. While the Scythian women had the temerity to be unfaithful it was still their male offspring who had the temerity to stand up to “real men,” and crumbled when authority was presented to them. This has the hallmarks of Greek myth, both in the collapse of the slave-offspring culture and the infidelity of the Scythian women.

What do we know of the status of women in this culture? Talbot-Rice, despite her work being nearly fifty years old, sums up the available information from documentary and archaeological sources thus (1957:60):

The ancient Greeks’ impression that Scythia was a matriarchy is not supported by archaeological evidence… In fact … all existing materials tend to show that although Scythian women were even more colourfully dressed than the men, they were nevertheless held in subservience, forced to travel in wagons with their children instead of riding beside their husband, obliged to devote themselves wholly to domestic pursuits and in some cases compelled to die with their consort. Nor were any emblems of authority placed beside them in their burial chambers.

More that twenty years later, Renate Rolle can add nothing constructive to this assessment, other than to record the fact that wine amphorae are also found in female
Scythian inhumations (1989 : 93), though whether this indicates that women *per se* had access to alcohol or merely that the elite took wine to the afterlife remains a moot point. Overall, we see a strongly patriarchal culture with well-delineated class structure, in which women held a rank superior only to slaves.

Nowhere in Herodotus’ account of the Scythians does he provide even a hint of the “female warrior caste” suggested by the female skeletons found in weapon-graves. If they had been an openly recognised stratum of Scythian society, he would likely have been exposed to them at some point, considering that he obtained information about even the Scythian priest caste. He was not informed of their existence by those with whom he spoke extensively, so what can we make of this?

Is it reasonable to assume the “female warrior caste” was a stratum of society not generally talked about, with which perhaps the Paralatae in general had some difficulty? Given the position the rest of Scythian women held, this might be the case, but why suffer them to exist at all if this was so? The relative richness of warrior graves, the provision of weapons in the graves, indicates high status. Warriors were commonly a high-status division of their cultures (Roman writings indicate this where the Celts are concerned), Herodotus speaks of the Scythians as every bit as militarised as the Celts, and for women to occupy a position within the warrior elite of the Paralatae remains a paradox. The inclination is to assign the burials, despite geographic locality, to the Sauro-Sarmatian culture. We may compare this to the situation with the Germanic tribes (below).

Was Herodotus performing a discrimination, separating off warrior women from the Scythians, perhaps despite other indications, and assigning them to the Sarmatians (which, ironically, would probably have been correct) or his mythologised “Amazons?” *Some* female warrior culture existed in a state of sporadic conflict with the Paralatae at this time, whether Sarmatians from the east or an as-yet unidentified social grouping from the west, Danubia or
the Carpathians — amongst the few words of the Scythian language Herodotus passes down to us are their name for this cultural entity, *Oior Pata*, “Man Killers.” Unless we are to assume Herodotus was composing fiction at this point, or again misinterpreting the information given to him, we are supplied with a single frame in the movie of the Pontic Steppe, in which we are given a solitary hint of a sex-based armed conflict, perhaps the only such instance in history. The traditional scholarly outlook is to dismiss this passage, but the warrior burials cannot be.

Against this background, where exactly do those female warrior graves of the Ukraine, discussed earlier, fit? It must be borne in mind that those particular graves have been dated to a point around a hundred years after Herodotus, so perhaps they represent a stratum of Scythian society that did not exist in his day. But it is highly doubtful that these interments represent the earliest (or indeed the latest) individuals of their kind. Are they Scythian in origin, or do they devolve from a contemporaneous, technologically comparable, but not ideologically aligned, geographic population? Who are these women? Who buried them with honours and ceremony, and why (if not for the sake of misogyny) did history forget — or choose to ignore — them? This latter point applies across the spectrum of female warrior elites from Ireland to China. Sulimirski (1985 : 195) suggests they were Sarmatians who “mingled with the Scyths, contributing many elements to the resulting new culture.” This writer finds such an event unlikely in the extreme.

**Scythian Artworks**

Artworks from Scythia almost never explicitly depict women (Talbot-Rice, 1957 : 67). Scythian men are realistically depicted, probably in the works of foreign craftsmen, commissioned as high-status luxury goods, a likely origin amongst the metalsmiths of Greek Olbia and other cities (Boardman 1980 : 259) probably explaining their extremely
representational quality. We see a Europoid stock with hair and beards worn long, the individuals engaged in scenes of everyday life, the doings of horsemanship, warfare and pastoralism. At all times the *gorytus*, the sheepskin case containing a short bow and arrows, is kept close by. Artworks durable enough to survive are bas reliefs in metal, often gold, on high-status objects recovered from kurgan burials. The famous gold comb from the Solocha kurgan, dated to ~400 BC, the two bands of frieze work around the top of the Chertomlyk Amphora, and the three levels of bas relief from the Tolstaya mogila pectoral, the Kul-Oba torc and beaker, the Voronezh vase, the Gaymanova moghila bowl, all discussed in depth by Rolle (1989: 58-59, 72-77 etc.) Talbot-Rice (1957: 67, 72-73, etc.) and others, have provided a priceless visual glimpse into the Scythian world.

The “Scythian animal style,” was abstract and based in depiction of the natural world, with sweeping curves and traceries that are sometimes reminiscent of Celtic Curvilinear. The depiction of animals is also a common theme with the Celts, and it is here, in what is probably the indigenous artform of the Steppe cultures (Boardman, 1980: 259 - 263) that there is latitude for religious inferences. Certainly there are no depictions, statues of any sort, of gods, thus while we are aware of a Steppe pantheon (Davis-Kimball, 2002: 69) their veneration was modified by the needs of nomadism: there are no statues because statues would be too difficult for nomads to take with them.

The “animal style” lends itself to shamanic inference, however, and it is a cautionary note that only when an obvious functionality is divorced from (representational) art can the modern interpreter infer spiritual meaning. Perhaps we should refrain from doing so as frequently as we do.

Women *are* found in art from the Scythian region, but not representationally. Abstract female figures are known from archaic-period sites north of Olbia, e.g. bronze mirrors with female anthropoid supports, but these, like the “Mistress of the Animals” and the “winged
“goddess” from Kelermes are considered expressly Greek work (Boardman, 1980: 260 - 261). This more or less agrees with our impression of Scythian female status as recorded (barely) by Herodotus, while further reducing the likelihood of the female warrior graves of the region actually belonging to any level of the Scythian culture.

Some burial mounds in Ukraine and Crimea are topped by statues of women wearing conical caps and veils (Talbot-Rice, 1957: 68), but it seems these figures long post-date the Scythian period, collections in museums, e.g., Rostov-na-Donu, being dated as late as AD1200 (Davis-Kimball, pers. comm.). Certainly, their dress-style does not correspond with known Scythian or Sarmatian forms, and leaves them as an isolated mystery. However, topping a burial mound with a stone figure is immediately reminiscent of the Celtic (male) Hirschlanden figure, discussed earlier, whose headgear was also of conical form (despite a Celtic suite of accouterments, however, the figure bears stylistic similarities to northern Etrurian materials (Cunliffe, 1997: 63)).

The warrior statue also corresponds with Scythian materials: Melyukova (1995: 36) says: “Scythian warriors’ stone sculptures were often raised at the tops of the kurgans. Archaeologists usually find these sculptures either in the embankments or in the kurgan ditches, indicating that they have fallen from their original placement.” Though attempting to meaningfully relate these materials is probably a futile exercise at this time, the superficial similarity cannot be ignored.

Hodder (1986: 170) said: “Indeed, it is often the absence of women from certain domains of representation that will support insight into gender constructions.” Their general absence from the Scythian artistic canon is difficult to construe in contexts other than that of a low social ranking. The record is of course woefully incomplete, with an unknown proportion of all interred artworks having been melted down by graverobbers. It may be that vital clues to ancient societies, contradicting the present outlook, were destroyed, thus
unavoidably biasing our view of this culture.

**Tacitus: The Germania**

Tacitus, senator, son-in-law of Julius Agricola, one-time Governor of Anatolia and vivid commentarist, wrote prolifically and is one of the best-known sources for the “foreign” peoples of his time. He wrote a treatise on the peoples north of the Alps, and his *Germania*, published almost simultaneously with his *Agricola* in AD 98 (Mattingly, 1970: 10; Grant, 1971: 8), is a glimpse of life in “barbarian” Europe in late La Tene times.

The tribes of whom he wrote, though they occupy a locality midway between the eastern (Austrian) and western (Gaulish) centres of Celtic vigour, were culturally very different from the familiar late La Tene peoples. Their religion had similarities, including a druid-like priest caste, but the focus and social power of the priests was subserviated to support of the patriarchy (Malcolm, 1972: 28). Technologically, the Germanic tribes were less sophisticated than the Celts from an early date, especially with regard to metalworking (almost useless cleaver-like, single-edged swords of “bog iron” were gradually replaced with finer two-edged swords until by late Roman times high-status Germanic warriors had blades the equal of Celtic workmanship, of which some no doubt were; Todd, 1972: 102 - 103), and their laws and customs reflect nothing of the high female statuses we have come to associate with the Celts.

For instance, Tacitus implies adultery was a crime only a female could commit, the penalty for which was exposure and expulsion, or (it appears) drowning in a peat bog, a punishment Tacitus reported applied to sodomy, after ritualised punishment (Ch. 19). One might be tempted to dismiss such apparently extreme behaviours as the creation of the writer in an attempt to “blacken” the barbarians, in much the light of caution with which we today view Caesar’s account (echoing the sole earlier mention, by Poseidonius) of the Celtic “wickerman” practice. However, despite the literary conventions of his time, the accustomed
blending of historiography with rhetoric and epic literature (Grant, 1971: 12), Tacitus is generally considered a reliable witness and reporter, whose embellishments are stylistic and restrained. And there is a major difference in the cases: while we have never discovered a truly creditable assemblage of human skeletal material in association with a carbon/ash deposit to indicate a mass immolation, supporting Caesar, we do have physical evidence which directly corresponds to Tacitus’ account of Germanic law. Specifically, the peat-preserved body of a drowned 14-year old girl (discovered in Windeby, Schleswig, on December 20th, 1951; Bruce-Mitford, 1969: 112-114) who exhibits the ritual treatment described in the text. This is impossible to dismiss.

So, we have accounts of two widely separated militaristic patriarchies with gender-stratified social systems. The Scyths and (at least some) Germans each relegated women to chatel-status, but in the territory of the Scyths we have those forty or more female warrior graves, which remain strongly paradoxical in light of this. We must also bear in mind that though Melpomene and the Germania were written 550 years apart, they may reflect the same broad-based and long-lived biases, difficult as it is to identify them in each writer’s frank, straightforward literary style (Herodotus is acknowledged as frank, Tacitus is today smoothed somewhat in translation (Grant, 1971: 26)). Given Herodotus’ record, skewed as it is, of female warriors in the east, it is reasonable to assume Tacitus would have recorded them amongst the Germanic tribes if they had been there to observe (at least in his day or living memory).

Nonetheless, true female status amongst the Germans is difficult to determine. Thompson (1965: 16) says “As for slaves, ancient authors give little information about the nature of Germanic slavery in the period before the Migrations. Their hints suggest that domestic slavery was restricted to females…” (Tacitus (Ch. 25) speaks of slaves only under the male pronoun and in a system that resembles Medieval bond-slavery, but it cannot be ignored that the pronoun at least may be an artefact of translation.) He goes on to describe a
PLATE #2 THE “WINDEBY GIRL”

The peat-preserved body of this 14-year old girl was discovered in 1951 at Windeby, Austria. Soft-tissue evidence here supports the assertions of Tacitus concerning the customs and laws of the Germanic tribes around the 1st c AD. It would appear this person was executed for either adultery or sodomy, or both, and was marked by ritual shaving of one side of the head.

system of matrilineal descent amongst the clan-societies (‘kindreds’) of the centuries BC
(1965 : 17): “In the kindreds of Caesar’s time descent may still have been reckoned in the
female line for many purposes, perhaps most.” Which he footnoted (1965 : 17):

The transition to father-right was still historically recent among the Germans
of whom Tacitus speaks and was still incomplete. Before Roman civilization
reached the southern borders of Germany and brought about the rapid social
changes … the matrilineal principle may have been in full force among some at
least of the peoples even of western Germany (to say nothing of those of the
remote north and east) and perhaps among a majority of them.

These concepts are comfortably in line with Tacitus’ account of the honoured women
among some tribes, but contrast strikingly with the chattel-status he infers amongst others.

It is as much a mistake to speak of “Germans” as if they were a single ethnic or
cultural entity, as it is to apply the same definition to “Celts.” Traditions, customs, social
norms and laws almost certainly varied widely within certain generalities, and the inputs of
the streams of ethnic infusion that came with the Teutoni, the Cimbri and doubtless others,
would have further complicated the Germanic world. This would provide a frame of
reference in which each of these observations may be quite accurate, while contrasting so
strongly with one another. That the Germanic tribes acculturated so powerfully during their
contact with Rome, powerfully enough to solidly redraw their social order in a form that
would last unchanged for hundreds of years (Todd, 1972 : 26) suggests a greater inherent
plasticity in the Germanic mindset than was true for the Celts. Though the tribes of Gaul and
Britain acculturated during their period of conflict with and occupation by Rome, there is
little evidence they took to the social institutions of the Mediterranean invaders at more than
a lip-service level. In reference to the lingering of a matrilineal system amongst the Germans,
it may actually be expected that the west and the north would be the places it would be found
last — furthest from Rome’s influence and closest to regions of both high female status
amongst the Celts of Gaul and to the homelands of the Northmen.
The early Germans are a difficult people to assess as the historic sources are thin — they “emerge into history in the pages of Caesar and Tacitus” (Todd, 1972: 24), though others. e.g., Poseidonius, Livy, Strabo and Pliny the Elder also wrote of the Germans. Their social, religious, artistic and technological capacities, plus the region of acculturative contact roughly on the line of the Rhine, complicates attempts to clearly identify ethnicities. How far west of the Rhine did Germanic influence reach? How far east did Celtic attitudes penetrate? Some may suggest there is little functional difference between Celts and Germans in late La Tene times, but, leaving aside the concept of ethnicity, in key areas such as metalworking, the preeminence of the priesthood and the apparent status of women in the culture, there would seem grounds for a definite sociocultural distinction.

J. G. Thompson (1996: 74) footnotes a worthwhile point concerning both the status of Germanic women and comparisons with the Celts to the west: Polybius, Plutarch and Strabo all mentioned warrior women amongst both cultures, lending weight to the argument that Caesar’s editorialising biased our traditional outlook badly. It also suggests Caesar’s account is preferentially followed, perhaps for no more sound a reason than that it reflects a more comfortable outlook for later scholars. No female warrior inhumations are recognized for the Germanic tribes at this time, though materials may exist subject to the same bias which still essentially denies their existence amongst the Celts. How we would relate Germanic warrior women to our overall impression of the Germanic tribes on existing sources is an open question, but the implications for social structure would likely be more contentious than for an equivalent female warrior elite amongst the Celts. This is further coloured by female warrior inhumations amongst the Saxons (Cox, pers. comm.): the Saxons were a Germanic people and if by the mid 1st millennium AD even their ancestral patriarchal outlook had been modified far enough to accept women amongst the warrior cadre, the odds of a female warrior cadre existing amongst the Celts rise sharply.
Amongst Tacitus’ reinforcements of Roman self-image one finds fragments of information that may be analysed independently. Thompson (1996: 42):

The sheer depth of sexism in antiquity is extremely difficult for modern readers to comprehend. With the notable exception of archaic-era (circa 700-400 BC) Sparta and her Dorian allies, virtually all Mediterranean cultures’ legal codes treated women as the chattel of male relatives and/or as mental incompetents. Even Cornelius Tacitus (A.D. 56 to 115), who spoke positively about the British queens in his works *The Annals of Imperial Rome* and *Agricola*, lapses into rather uncharacteristic diatribe in Chapter 45 of his work *Germania*:

“Bordering on the Suiones are the nations of the Sitones. They resemble them [the other German tribes] in all respects but one — woman is the ruling sex. That is the measure of their decline, I will not say below freedom, but even below decent slavery.”

Tacitus’ blatant male chauvanism should be viewed as a common Roman reaction to the female emancipation movement which accompanied the transition from Rome as a Republic to Rome as an empire. Specifically, many noble Roman women rejected the traditional role of *materfamilia domina* and became actively engaged in politics and religion. Accordingly Tacitus and other Roman writers frequently blame women for the moral decline in Roman culture.

Tacitus’ throwaway comment that a certain Germanic tribal amalgam was, by implication, matriarchal, may be deconstructed at some length. That the Sitones were “ruled” by women may mean no more than that women enjoyed such rights and respects amongst those particular kindreds as they had amongst the Teutons, centuries earlier, though Tacitus does not make this clear: compared to the status of women elsewhere in his contemporary Germanic culture, such a level of gender equality may have been sarcastically dismissed by the writer as being “ruled.” (To place this in perspective, however, he is not at all scathing toward the people he described earlier in his work.) Alternately, a powerful female figure may have emerged and seized dominion with the support of her kindred warriors, creating a Germanic Boudicca, though this is pure speculation. It would seem unlikely that a specific tribe would overthrow in perpetuity so fundamental an institution as the gender roles typifying the culture of the period.
Egypt

Herodotus traveled in Egypt and wrote on many aspects of the country, including its climate, geography, economy, art, architecture, religion and society. In the second book of his *Histories*, *Euterpe* (the division into books and their common names being probably an editorial decision made in Alexandria c. 280 BC (Burn, 1972 : 17) he looks at the society of post-dynastic but pre-Alexandrian Egypt, still a vigorous, educated culture but one whose political and military greatness were long past. The cultural markers handed down from the more than two millennia of largely continuous history had left their stamp on the people, and Herodotus’ comments (II, 35; de Selincourt, 1954 : 142-143) are indicative of the schism between one society and another, the contrast merely in assumptions of normative behaviour:

Not only is the Egyptian climate peculiar to that country, and the Nile different in its behaviour from other rivers elsewhere, but the Egyptians themselves in their manners and customs seem to have reversed the ordinary practices of mankind. For instance, women attend market and are employed in trade, while men stay at home and do the weaving. In weaving the normal way is to work the threads of the weft upwards, but the Egyptians work them downwards. Men in Egypt carry loads on their heads, women on their shoulders; women pass water standing up, men sitting down… No woman holds priestly office, either in the service of goddess or god; only men are priests in both cases. Sons are under no compulsion to support their parents if they do not wish to, but daughters must, whether they wish it or not.

The mosaic of life seems to have been fitted together differently in the isolation of Egypt’s older power, giving life in the Nile Valley a unique character that persisted into later times. Herodotus’ comments underline both contrasts and similarities to life in other cultures. Amongst the Celts, women were the weavers, which would seem to be his concept of normality, though should Celtic women, walking openly in their societies, have engaged in trade, it would most definitely have been as upside-down as his view of Egypt’s people.

We may contrast the absence of female cultic office in Egypt with the absolute female-dominance of cultic office amongst the early Steppe cultures, and the apparently shared status amongst the Celts. These patterns may have no wider significance but be cultural artifacts, the happenstance merely of custom. Certainly women enjoyed generally
better social status in Egypt than in Greece, despite at least some Greek women having a religious role open to them.

Davies (1984 : 312-313) speaks of the rights of women before the law with regard to marriage in Greek-influenced Egypt:

Egyptian evidence … shows marriage first as a formal written contract between the husband and the parents of the bride, then as a relationship involving two contracts, one involving the bride’s father but the other the spouses alone, and finally as a relationship wherein the spouses are the only contractual parties. *Prima facie*, the emancipation involved is substantial, but qualifications are needed. The expectations which the contracts spell out remain unequal: marriages without contract (*agraphos gamos*) are well attested in Egypt and are assumed to represent the older Greek style; marriage by *engye* certainly continued unchanged in Greece; and the use of contracts may have been due to the specific circumstances of a colonial context where relatives might be distant, spouses be of different cities, and social constraints less effective, so that a contract gave both parties more effective security. Most fundamental qualification of all, women’s control over their basic decisions whether to marry or not, and whether to procreate or not, can at best have been patchy and precarious: most women will have had no effective choice.

This passage is footnoted: “Unmarried free women, though attested, are rare, and methods of contraception were often medically unsound.”

*Arrian: The Campaigns of Alexander*

Arrian (Flavius Arrianus Xenophon) was a Greek citizen of Bithynia born around AD 90, who rose to be a Consul of the Roman Army under the Emperor Hadrian. A brilliant scholar and soldier, he fought the Alani in Armenia in AD 134, and after his retirement around AD 145 he devoted his time to writing. His narratives seem the product of an entirely reasonable, frank and unbiased mind, and late in his history of Alexander the Great he touches upon the oft-quoted anecdote of Alexander’s contact with “Amazons” in western Asia (de Selincourt, 1958):

It was in the course of this journey [from Opis to Ecbatana] that Alexander is said to have seen the plain called the plain of Nesaea where the royal mares were pastured. Herodotus tells us the mares were always known as Nesaean… There is a story that while Alexander was there, Atropates, the governor of Media, sent him a hundred women who he declared were Amazons. They were equipped like cavalrymen, but carried axes instead of spears and light targes instead of the ordinary cavalry shield… Alexander
sent the women away to prevent trouble; for they might well have met with unseemly
treatment from the troops, Macedonian or foreign. However, he told them to inform
their Queen that he would visit her one day and get her with child.

This last is footnoted: “Many writers related a visit by the Amazon Queen to
Alexander in Hyrcania or near the Jaxartes.”

Arrian goes on:

This story is not to be found in Aristobulus or Ptolemy, or, indeed, in any other
reliable writer; personally I doubt if the Amazons still existed at that date — indeed
Xenophon, writing before Alexander’s time, never mentions them… I cannot, however,
bring myself to believe that this race of women, whose praises have been sung so often
by the most reputable writers, never existed at all… If Atropates really did present
some female cavalry troopers to Alexander, I should imagine they must have been
women, of some nationality or other, who had been taught to ride and equipped in the
traditional Amazon style.

Arrian perhaps unwittingly contradicts himself in reference to the credibility of
sources who do or do not mention “Amazons,” but in his closing comments probably defines
the matter correctly. The incident is reputed to have occurred shortly before the death of
Hephaestian, which provides a date of the winter of 324-323 BC, or around six months before
Alexander died in Babylon (Renault, 1975 : 208-231), and at this time both the Saka and
Sarmatian cultures dominated the Steppes beyond the northern boundaries of the Achaemenid
Persian Empire, which Alexander had consumed. Ecbatana lies just south of the Caspian Sea;
the Jaxartes (Syr Darya) flows west into the Aral Sea from the steppes of south-eastern
Kazakhstan, the territory of the Massagetae Saka at whose hands Cyrus the Great met his
end.

Mounted female warriors were a part of the reality of the Steppe cultures, thus the
company allegedly encountered by Alexander in Media, if they are indeed of historic
substance, were likely either Sarmatians or Saka. It is supremely unfortunate that the
overriding weight of Greek documentary and social bias attached to the very word “Amazon”
has so clouded attitudes upon this point that a straightforward ethnographic observation has
been relegated to the status of mythology ever since.
The Legacy of Myth

The Greek commentarist Plutarch, in his volume Lives, provides an account of the life of Theseus, which from the perspective of the 1st c AD he is careful to note as the least substantive and most mythologised of his biographies.

The story of Theseus’ journey to the Amazon city of Themiscyra, his abduction of Queen Antiope, and of the war that followed, is one of the signatory chapters in the opus of Greek Myth which straddles the boundary between mythology and history. The two were so interwoven in Greek life that there seems no way to extract the threads of reality from fantasy, and an objective viewpoint, if not to merely dismiss the entire opus, seems impossible. Certainly elements are historically credible — sea voyages, abducting foreign heads of state, an alliance between an eastern sovereignty and the Paralatae resulting in the movement of a force around the Black Sea… But when and how and who was involved, and why, or even if, are questions enmeshed in mythology so deeply satisfactory synthesis may never be possible.

Westra (1991) dismisses the entire episode as a complex cycle of legend designed to support the innately insecure Athenian male mind, and there is some substance in this. Athenian misogynist paranoia, however, has no bearing on the factual existence of female warriors of a variety of ethnicities; indeed, the converse seems plausible — the Athenians had something to be genuinely afraid of and found solace in stories of victories that never happened.

The degree to which “Amazons” entered into the ancient mindset can be judged by their appearance in surviving artworks — and their effect on the modern mindset by the ways in which those same artworks are interpreted. Amazonomachy (Onians, 1979) is an entire artistic form in which female warriors are depicted in a vast range of situations and scenarios, from the most warlike to the most domestic.
On the Tomb of Mausolus in Halicarnassus, the monolithic bas relief includes a figure usually considered an Amazon Queen, and it is notable that she does not display the mutilation characteristic of Herodotus’ mythologised race, but is fashioned with the right breast intact. The very name translates as “breastless ones,” and implies removal or suppression of the right mammary to “divert” strength to the right arm, but there is no evidence to suggest this took place amongst any known people. Indeed, modern medical experience indicates that the strength of the affected arm is reduced in women who have undergone mastectomy, not increased (Davis-Kimball, pers. comm.). Could this be one of those instances where Herodotus misinterpreted something he saw or was told, as with the case of the hemp-seed braziers? Also, he did not come into personal contact with the mysterious Oior Pata, and merely repeated what he was told of them — by the Paralatae: surely a jaundiced viewpoint, and hardly liable to be unbiased. Supporting this contention, there are in fact no known Classical artworks, whether painted vessels, bronzes or bas reliefs, that depict female warriors with the right breast missing.

There is also evidence in linguistic studies (Davis-Kimball, 2002: 118) to suggest the name derives from Proto-Indo-European, and means simply “woman without a husband.” In this case, the unfortunate phonetic coincidence with the much later derivative Greek language saddled whomever these people may have been, assuming they were a discrete identity at all, with a mythologised image and cast them in a harshly judgmental light that has been perpetuated to the present time by the pervasive impact of Classical culture.

Other examples of the way social bias colours interpretation involve surviving artworks. At the religious site of Dodona in northern Greece a bronze statuette dated to ca 550 BC was found, and has been consistently judged male (Plate #3) The piece is currently in the National Museum in Athens, whose catalog lists it as a “young male.” It has also been interpreted as a “brother of Helen of Troy.” The figure, however, clearly has breasts (plural) and the artist accurately reproduced the insertion point of the gastrocnemius (calf) muscle,
PLATE #3 THE DODONA “YOUTH”

This bronze statue, dated to the mid-6th c BC, has in the past been ascribed to gender male: the plain chiton dress and bared limbs, the raised head and astride posture, combined with the assumption that riding was an exclusively male pursuit in Ancient Greece, combine to reach a patently unreasonable conclusion. Body morphology alone clearly indicates this person to be female, but anthropometrics are here ignored as surely in interpretation of artworks as they are in assessment of inhumed materials from the Iron Age cemeteries of Europe.

which is lower in women than men. Today, the “untutored” eye sees only a woman, from her long hair to her proudly uplifted profile, and the modern mindset encounters no difficulty in a woman with bared limbs riding astride.

A massive felt wall hanging from Pazyryk Kurgan 2 bears a repeating design of a horseman in audience with a seated figure holding a “tree of life” motif. Bokovenko (1995c:291) identifies the seated figure as a male priest, while Davis-Kimball (2002:75-76) finds the image firmly in keeping with the apparently female-dominated religious institution of the eastern steppes. Is the depiction so ambiguous? Not really, but traditional viewpoints are difficult to dislodge.

Four warrior women perform the “Parthian shot,” in bronze vignettes around the lid of an ornate flagon… Four more ride around the rim of another, in classic garb. Are these purely mythological figures or do they represent a Greek artist’s impression, for Greek consumption, of a little-understood foreign ethnicity? Are they culturally-metamorphed Sarmatians? Such questions are not new, and may be unanswerable, but the historic reality of female warriors fulfilling these roles in spirit if not in detail is now beyond doubt.

The next chapter examines the physical evidence from exhumations and considers the accuracy of biological sexing techniques. The mechanism of assigning gender to remains is examined, highlighting exceptions and controversies. The still-new amelogenin gene signature for sexing is considered, along with the implications of the conditions of deposition, e.g. the contents of Saka graves are too poorly preserved for this investigation to be confidently applied. Key excavations are considered in light of anthropometric sexing as contrasted with bimodal grave good suites, and the consequences arising from initial sex ascription error are discussed.
Chapter Four:

Archeological and Anthropometric Evidence

One would think any systematization of mortuary variability would address quite automatically the issues of the balances between gender roles, in addition to the sexual demographic of populations in question, but this has not been the case. Indeed, no coherent theory as a whole, irrespective of gender issues, has been possible, despite vigorous work.

The first sophisticated systematization study was Lewis Binford’s 1964 investigation of the Mississipian culture at Galley Pond Mound, on which seminal theories were proposed. O’Shea (1984) put that work into context thus:

Binford proposes that the position of the individual, and the size and composition of the group of individuals who owe him status duties, constitute the primary vehicle for mortuary differentiation. The systematic link between mortuary differentiation and social position rests on the proposition that the amount of corporate participation, and the aspects of the social persona that are ritually symbolized through differential treatment, vary directly with the relative rank of the individual within the living community. Since ranking and differentiation are often seen as logical concomitants of complexity, Binford’s model fits the standard social dichotomies of simple versus complex and egalitarian versus ranked, and it is not surprising that social considerations at this level should be significant in the testing of his propositions or in the work of researchers following Binford’s lead.

Twenty years on from Binford, O’Shea was proposing a systematization of the means for interpretation of mortuary materials, but sex and gender were not in focus in his reasoning. Sex was one variable amongst many, and at no point did he raise the issue of the accuracy of sex ascription to exhumations.

Taking this as an aside, it is interesting to see to what degree the overstatement of the obvious is necessary (the principle of pedantry). After a brief roundup of previous workers in the field of mortuary analysis, O’Shea comments: “Common to all these applications is the assumption that an individual’s treatment in death bears some predictable relationship to the individual’s state in life and to the organization of the society to which the individual
belonged.” This is so blindingly obvious that it raises the question as to where assumptions lay prior to Binford’s work, and how hidebound theory had been prior to the rise of the New Archeology. It also goes at least some way toward explaining the frantic attempts, four decades ago, to find some way to explain and present the individual in the high-status tomb at Vix as male (Case Study, below).

Further to this line of thought, O’Shea synthesizes Peebles’ 1971 thinking (p13-14):

Peebles first noted that the reason social organization is available to archeologists is that they view a cumulative record. Since each individual is assumed to have been buried in accordance with his or her social standing in life, by observing the range and frequency of different disposal treatments, the archeologist can infer the principles governing that differentiation… Simple as this may seem, it represents a major change in perspective from the studies based on ethnographic data and implies the need for distinct analytical procedures that are relevant to the archeological manifestation of mortuary variability. It also reflects a growing awareness of the need to understand the archeological record itself, as a necessary first step in understanding past funerary behavior. Finally, though the premise is intuitively obvious, the limitations that it implies may be less so.

Peebles (1971) went on to outline the conflict between sample size and change over time — that a large mortuary assemblage is desirable for establishing general trends in the subject population, but in the time it takes for such a mortuary population to accumulate diachronic change can undermine the very trends one seeks to quantify. This is particularly important when considering the social systems at work in geographic populations over hundreds of years, and, in the case of, e.g., the Celts, over a thousand years. It is imperative to break any study down into manageable temporospatial units in which diachronic change is minimized, yet accumulation of materials from a narrower temporospatial locus and their survival to the present are influenced by many other factors.

Powell et. al. (1997 : 255) state: “The fundamental and, unfortunately, most difficult task of paleodemographic analysis is recovering or assembling an adequate sample of remains to constitute a population.” If a cemetery is being assessed, the certainty of this is perhaps better than encountered in a coordination of scattered interments.

Gender assumptions lag behind clinical systematization, however, flying in the face of
O'Shea’s proposal above, and may well still carry with them, even at the base of the 21st century, the baggage of some pre-Binfordian outlook, in which gender bimodality is a fixed assumption whose quantities do not change significantly over tens of thousands of years, nor over large geographic areas. But in the generation since O’Shea’s dense prose, gender issues have received considerable attention, and reevaluation of this aspect of mortuary variability is desirable. It is also perhaps inevitable that old conclusions be taken to task, which has occurred widely in archeology in the post-processual era (Shafer, 1997 : 15).

However, even in Binford’s day, data were being amassed that throw an interesting light on the current study. In his 1972 analysis of patterns of mortuary behaviour amongst various pre-European contact societal types (in O’Shea, 1984 : 6), he assessed for variation in burials according to other dimensions, including age and sex. While his raw data (based on admittedly a small sample group) showed marked variation in burial practice according to sex between Hunter-gatherers, Shifting Agriculturalists, Settled Agriculturalists and Pastoralists, when these data were subjected to a one-tailed test at a 0.05 significance level, sex was one of three dimensions that showed no significant variation at all, the others being location of death and social affiliation. So in the populations sampled, sex was not a determinant in burial characteristics, irrespective of a wide range of social systems. This is an isolated but interesting example as it suggests a regional and/or temporal continuity with respect to gender roles in the extant cultures.

Standard Anthropometric Methodology

Bones and teeth are the most durable matter in animal bodies, surviving many thousands of years after the final decomposition of the soft tissues. This varies with the environment of deposition, hair is sometimes found, and cold, anoxic conditions, exceptional dryness or combinations of all three, can preserve soft tissues. But such “mummification” is
comparatively rare, thus the skeleton is the most common biological material we have to work with.

The human being is, like all higher organisms, a sexually dimorphic animal. The sexes are distinguished on a host of subtle morphological character states, and the skeleton reflects a number of them: overall height by itself is only a vague indicator, but the ratios of the length and width of some bones, to themselves and each other, the subtle features of the skull, and the markedly different proportions of the pelvic girdle, provide primary information as to the sex of an inhumed individual (Shipman, et al, 1985 : 270-277; Bass, 1995; Mays and Cox, 2000 : 117-121; White, 2000; Byers, 2002 : 171-192), even supposing there is no other information (e.g., grave goods, pollen etc.) available at all. Illiterate cultures did not erect eulogic markers, no matter how grand the tomb or burial edifice, which would provide us clues about the deceased and, directly, about the gender roles of the culture in question. Obliquely, one cannot help wondering what role the nonliterate cultures (and their gender norms) would play in our view of history if, for instance, the Celts or the Saka had left writings behind, texts and monumental inscriptions as voluminous as those of Egypt or Babylon.

Mortuary studies comprise a large part of field archeology, and competent sexing is crucially important. As the case studies below demonstrate, the implications of either an incorrect diagnosis or an ascription of sex based on biased judgement of indirect evidence, generates a view of the individual and his or her position and function in the represented culture that is essentially worthless. Even more importantly, biased conclusions accepted as gospel by establishment or public lead to the perpetuation of a fallacious view of history.

The bias is also significant in and of itself as a marker of the tenets of modern society: the reevaluation of past exhumations has revealed many women misdiagnosed as men, but instances of men misdiagnosed as women are far more obscure. Margaret Cox (pers. comm.)
underlines the ambiguities that surround this kind of research:

The real issue here is that in most cases we really don’t know what the ‘real’ biological sex is. We assume that biological criteria are used correctly and give the right result but from Spitalfields I incorrectly sexed a female as male largely because she was huge and osteologically masculine - her coffin plate stated she was a she by virtue of name title etc. but who knows?

My feeling is that where only crania survive, many young adult males may be incorrectly sexed as females because we do not know at what age the facial/cranial changes take place. They come much later than pelvic dimorphism, that we do know. I have seen numerous young adult males from WW1 contexts with female crania and male pelves so there may have been many errors where no pelvis survives.

The above may compound the question of modern bias, as the general warrior cadre throughout so many past societies were (it is commonly assumed) largely adolescent males: yet many warrior burials which may indeed have featured female characteristics of the skull, with or without the presence of a pelvis, never prompted investigators to even moot that some female warrior cadre existed. Modern culture forbade the speculation.

Artefactual sexing is pervasive and at times its application verges on the irrational. Witt (1997) states:

It is painful to acknowledge that Hochdorf and Vix are the only properly studied and published elite “Celtic” skeletons of around 500 BCE of which I am aware. This is not an adequate database on which to build a model of “Celtic” dimorphism. Even if more skeletons were preserved, it is particularly disheartening to read in Brothwell that “there is a constant danger of incorrect sexing, and indeed … there is a 12 per cent bias in favour of males” (1981, 59). We may add that, in the case of Iron Age Europe, there is an almost overwhelming bias in favor of the particular scholar’s list artifically-based criteria. This leads to such bizarre phenomena as the resexing of skeletons from female to male based solely on the presence of weapons in the tomb. Grave 116 in the non-elite cemetery at the Dürmberg, for example, contains projectile points and other weapons; although the skeleton is clearly female according to anthropological criteria, it is considered male because of the weapons and counted as such in the demographic analyses of the site.

This latter wagers heavily in favour of the existence of an as-yet unrecognised female warrior tradition in Iron Age Europe.

One can justifiably wonder what the archaeology of fifty years ago would have made of the Saxon individual unearthed in 2003 (as yet unpublished), a person of gigantic physical stature, buried with shield and spear blade, but whose skeleton appears female. This
individual is “far from the only Saxon woman buried with weapons” (Cox, pers. comm.), which relates comfortably to Härke’s eleven Anglo-Saxon female weapon graves. To the thinking of Joffroy and others of his mindset, these factors are cultural counter-indicators, and would pose an uncomfortable paradox. Even in 1997, Härke dismissed the association of weapons with female skeletons as “errors [in identification], or later disturbance of the sites” (Effros, 2000 : 635), so powerful is the influence of artefactual sexing methodology.

Misdiagnosis and paradox apply to the full tenure of human history, from the recent to the distant past. Genoves (1963 : 345) mentions cases wherein human palaeontology has erred due to incomplete technical application: “… Minnesota Man seems in fact to be a Girl and Tepexpan Man is very probably Tepexpan Woman. It is clear that in these and in other cases, the original error was due largely to natural ignorance of the progress which has been made in sex diagnosis in recent years.” Powell et. al. (1997 : 255) offer a more optimistic outlook, reflecting that accumulation of data: “Care should be taken that the age and sex determinations are unbiased, and fortunately, detection of biased data has become easier.”

Throughout most of the world, sexing of skeletal remains is performed primarily on the anthropometric basis mentioned above. This involves the close inspection of surviving materials to identify sex-specific features (“anthroposcopic” analysis, literally, what it looks like.) In all but the most decomposed skeletal matter it is usually possible to find at least some clues, and for individuals for whom complete skeletons and/or intact pelves or skulls are present, the osteological cues are rarely ambiguous. While certain factors can be confusing (e.g., some geographic populations have sexually dimorphic character states which, while distinct from each other, can be ambiguous if compared to the opposite sexes of other geographic populations (see below), anatomists can be confident of their identification in the majority of cases. Cases can be puzzling, of course: Byers (2002 : 172) describes a case of forensic analysis of a body in advanced decomposition, in which elements of the
skeleton seemed contradictory, as did elements of surviving clothing.

Morphological variation in the human skeleton is considerable, and the subject of vigorous study to assist in forensic, anthropological and archeological investigations (Bass, 1995: 1). Interestingly, this even extends to the total number of bones: the standard number is 206, but can occasionally be greater, as can the total number of teeth. Osteology is an intensely comparative field in which morphologies are grouped into categories of age, sex and racial type (e.g., American white, American black, Australian Aboriginal, European, Asian) The difficulties with sexing are more complex than might be anticipated. Bass (1995: 85), discusses sexing by use of the skull as an individual source of information:

The skull is probably the second best area of the skeleton to use for determining sex. Estimation of sex is based on the generalization that the male is more robust, rugged, and muscle marked than the female. Absolute differences seldom exist, and many intermediate forms are found...

The question of absolute differences bears on the Vix Princess controversy, and was the subject of debate. Shipman (1985: 249) condenses the issue thus: “As a general rule, males have more robust skeletons than females, although males of one population may be lighter, shorter and less heavily muscled than females of another population with a different lifestyle.”

Powell, Steele and Collins (1997: 274) describe the problem in similar general terms:

In the skull, determination of sex is more problematic. Here, sexually dimorphic features reflect relative differences in size and robusticity, features that tend to overlap greatly in most human populations. A large female from a robust population can be mistaken for a male from a gracile population. Sex determinations from the skull are therefore accepted with greater caution unless the researcher has had previous experience with that particular population, and knows the range of variation for males and females.

Reproductive anatomy is the greatest area of difference between the sexes, and the first choice for diagnosis is the pelvis. While the bones are structurally related in the same way, overall proportion and orientation differs, generating distinctly different numerical indexes, specifically the ischiopubic index (Shipman, 1985: 275). If the pelvis is present and
sufficiently complete to yield useable figures, confidant sexing should not be difficult in adult specimens.

**Table 4.1 Classic Traits of the Male versus female Pelvis**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trait</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Size</td>
<td>Large and rugged</td>
<td>Small and gracile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illium</td>
<td>High and vertical</td>
<td>Low and flat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pelvic inlet</td>
<td>Heart shaped</td>
<td>Circular or elliptical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public shape</td>
<td>Narrow and rectangular</td>
<td>Broad and square</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subpubic angle</td>
<td>V-shaped</td>
<td>U-shaped</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obturator foramen</td>
<td>Large and ovoid</td>
<td>Small and triangular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater sciatic notch</td>
<td>Narrow</td>
<td>Wide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preauricular sulcus</td>
<td>Rare</td>
<td>Well developed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shape of sacrum</td>
<td>Long and narrow</td>
<td>Short and broad</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1After Table 37 of Krogman (1962)

This table derived from Byers (2002 : 173), Table 8.1.

An additional technique proposed by Askadi and Nemeskeri in 1970 (described by Powell, *et al*, 1997) concerns establishment of a spectrum of variability within a particular population. The model uses indexes of characteristics to establish a range from the most feminine traits (rated -2) to most masculine (+2) traits encountered within a subject population, so that individuals can be assigned sex on a relative basis.

A further complication concerns the effects of lifestyle on skeletal morphology (and which bears strongly on the biases influencing sexing). Genoves (1963 : 345) points out:

…it must be stressed that one cannot judge prehistoric remains by the same criterion as modern ones. Frequently the diagnosis was based on traces of muscular insertions, forgetting that in early remains, and in the majority of our so-called ‘primitive contemporaries’, the cultural environment and different division of work, amongst other factors, can put a good part of the female population to fulfilling tasks which require considerable muscular exertion. This would certainly affect bone size and form.

Thus the skeleton of a woman who works on the land, who rides and perhaps fights if need be, would bear certain detail similarities to that of a man, whom our culture expects to do these tasks and for whom that woman may be assumptively mistaken should the
PLATE #4 COMPARITIVE STRUCTURE OF MALE AND FEMALE PELVES

In an idealised comparison based on modern populations, the differences between male and female pelves can be readily seen. Unfortunately, in practice the differences are rarely so clear, and the archaeological sample groups from which comparison can be made can be frustratingly small.

investigation be too cursory or the skeleton incomplete enough to prevent definite sex assignment. Should she be buried with a saddle, farm tools or a weapon, her identification is deeply obscured to standard interpretation. This also illuminates the paradoxical results of sociocultural analysis of such an individual should key sex identifiers (skull, pelvis) actually be available.

Mays and Cox (2000:120) report the not-uncommon occurrence of the same skeletons displaying both male and female characteristics:

Although sexing from the skull is potentially quite reliable, problems may arise, particularly in weakly dimorphic populations. For example, the skull may indicate one sex, the pelvis the other… In instances where the sex indications from the pelvis and skull are in conflict, it is possible that the former might be more reliable as dimorphism of the pelvis is directly related to function. Clearly this hypothesis needs testing on an appropriate sample of the documented sex. Recently, one of the authors (MC) examined a medieval skeleton from East Anglia where the skull was characteristically male and the pelvis female. DNA analysis suggested the individual was female, but DNA analysis is not totally reliable.

The impact of lifestyle should not be underestimated, nor should the range of morphological variation which can occur. Genoves continues (1963:346):

Thus Wood Jones, working on Egyptians, found foetuses in pelves with characteristics which were to him distinctly masculine, and Faulhaber says, referring to the prehispanic remains at Tlatilco (Mexico): ‘As for the sex characteristics, the number of cases in which the female skeletons have an extremely robust appearance, similar in this character to the males, is surprising, although according to the pelvic characters they are unquestionably women.’

The degree to which lifestyle can shape even primary diagnostic areas is considerable. The skull may seem a largely fixed structure in which genetics are the main shaping tool, but Mays and Cox (2000:125) offer cautions which bear directly upon interpretations of the Vix Princess’ skull:

Most of the sexually dimorphic features of the skull used in the estimation of sex are simply correlated with robusticity, the male being the more robust. However, dietary and other factors may affect skull robusticity. A coarse, tough diet, requiring heavy mastication, as was generally consumed by all peoples before recent times, resulted in greater skull robusticity, particularly of the facial skeleton. Archaeological skulls may, therefore, tend to show a more ‘masculine’ appearance in these areas than modern reference material.
Table 4.2 Characteristics of Male and Female Skulls

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traits</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Size</td>
<td>Large and rugged</td>
<td>Small and smooth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mastoid</td>
<td>Large, projecting</td>
<td>Small, nonprojecting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brow ridges</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>Small, none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frontal</td>
<td>Slanted</td>
<td>High, rounded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuchal area</td>
<td>Rugged with hook</td>
<td>Smooth, hook uncommon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supraorbital margin</td>
<td>Rounded</td>
<td>Sharp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chin</td>
<td>Broad</td>
<td>Pointed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


This table derived from Byers (2002 : 180), Table 8.3.

Morphologies are usually the first step in sex determination, the gross characteristics of the materials providing broad and generally reliable guides. Thereafter, in clinical, forensic and archaeological work, sexing is a matter of taking the measurements and referring to clinical standard tables for the reference ranges of the various bones as recorded for different populations. By this comparative analysis, a consensus on even fragmentary remains is fairly straightforward. However, materials may be in very poor condition, highly fragmented, and key diagnostic elements may be absent. In such cases determination may be possible only by placing a single bone within a known reference range for a population in a particular time and place, clearly a low-confidence result. Overlap may occur with other tables, and this introduces an uncertainty factor. This would be especially true if only limb bones are found, and, as Bass points out (1995 : 25), subadults are much more difficult to sex anyway due to extreme similarity prior to sexual divergence at puberty:

The question still arises as to whether subadult skeletal material can be accurately sexed, but the consensus is that any determination is little better than a guess. The secondary characteristics do not manifest themselves until puberty; thus it is impossible to judge the remains of children and adolescents because the means available relate to adult traits. Most of the techniques employed to determine the sex of subadult bones depend on X-rays taken in life. These techniques seldom apply to dry bone.
In a further idealised comparison drawn from modern populations, the differences between male and female skulls are quite dramatic. In an archaeological context, skulls can be highly contentious indicators of sex, as they are often bereft of dependable population indexes for comparison.

Mays and Cox (2000: 121-125) review promising alternative techniques for sexing infant materials, while underlining the caution necessary in this process, while Byers (2002: 189) reports that existing methods provide a 70% probability of accurate sexing in subadults, but that a 30% error factor remains highly undesirable, especially in forensic work.

When osteological investigations are performed in the archaeological context, the problems are amplified. An isolated inhumation may prove difficult to assess, and even a large mortuary complex may yield incomplete information due to poor preservation. A large sample group allows for the establishment of a reference range for the geographic population in question, and comparison of individuals within the group allows for determinations based on contrast. Nevertheless, some workers have obtained very high confidence in sexing prehistoric populations, as reported by Cohen and Bennett (1993):

Skeletons of prehistoric individuals provide some of the most useful archaeological data for gender studies. Well-preserved adult skeletons can be sexed with an accuracy in excess of 95 per cent, and even fragmentary human remains can often be sexed with an accuracy of 85 per cent or more.

Some specialists are extremely skilled at sexing bones, developing almost an instinctive feel for the material. Davis-Kimball (2002: 12) speaks of an elderly Russian anthropologist who instructed Leonid Yablonsky long ago, who in the field would preliminarily ascribe sex (usually accurately) on the characters of the skull, read by touch alone. In light of Bass’s generalization cited above, this is hardly unreasonable for one with a lifetime of experience.

While much of the material from Central Asia is well-preserved, it is not uncommon for skeletal remains to disintegrate in a matter of hours once the stable environment of a tumulus is breached. Thus morphological assessment and anthropometrics must be performed rapidly and accurately. Sometimes even if the materials are stable after exhumation, they are comparatively poor, and are discarded after study, only rich grave goods being retained. It must also be noted that the methodology and competence of much of the work done in the
former Soviet Republics is substandard, and many potentially valuable samples are discarded unrecorded in favour of more complete or richer burials (Ammerman, pers. comm.)

**DNA-based Methodology**

When materials are too poor for anthropometric indexes to be satisfactorily obtained, and key significators (e.g., skull, pelvis) are missing, genetics offers another approach, and is increasingly employed on both new and stored materials. If a usable genetic sample can be obtained from bones or teeth, irrespective of their condition, certain tests can still sex the individual (Brown, 2000: 462-465). The *amelogenin* gene codes for that component of tooth enamel and is present in characteristically different alleles on both the X and Y chromosomes, thus if this gene can be isolated the individual can be sexed with a single test (most commonly using polymerase chain reaction, the results read via gel electrophoresis, less commonly using hybridization and filtration). Three different tests have been designed for examination of the amelogenin gene and used with considerable success.

Davis-Kimball (1997/98) says: “A sensitive and reliable method of sex identification was developed based on the amplification of the single-copy amelogenin-encoding gene (AMG). Cortical, cranial bones and teeth were found to provide sufficiently preserved DNA to determine sex of individuals dating from 200 to c. 8000 years ago.” Similarly, if simply a Y chromosome can be identified, the individual is obviously male. However, ancient DNA is typically far too fragmentary for a whole chromosome to be recognised) and if the Y-chromosome version of AMG cannot be recognised a series of other tests can be applied to identify the X- equivalent (Effros, 2000: 637).

DNA extraction is not simple, however, and there are many problems with the method, such as amplification failure, the inherent insensitivity of the hybridization method, and the extremely fragmentary nature of ancient DNA. Perhaps most significantly, at this
time sexing by DNA techniques returns an accuracy in the order of 85% (Brown, 2000 : 465), which is central to the confidence range of morphometric techniques. Further refinements to the genetic approach are required to realise its full potential: new techniques continue to appear, and we can expect genotyping to play a significant role in the future.

*Indirect/Implicit Sexing Methodology*

Gilchrist (1991 : 497-498) summarised the origins and problems of bimodal artefactual sexing as a tool for denoting social structure:

Processualist studies first approached the issue of gender by attempting to recognize artefact patterns characteristic of male and female, so as to define activity areas and zones of spatial control … These studies involved implicit assumptions concerning male and female roles and the sexual division of labour. The problem remains as to whether artefacts should be linked to male and female on the basis of ethnographic parallel — a form of analogy currently out of favour — or only where sexed skeletons are associated with grave goods. The approach behind artefact correlates often assumes an exclusive means of male and female signification, or an exclusive sexual division of labour. The emphasis is on making gender, or more specifically women, visible in the archaeological record. This premise relies on recognizing women’s behaviour as deviant to a standard which is male. Artefact correlates remain problematic, particularly now that many archaeologists recognize the androcentrism of their social interpretations. Each of the theoretical frameworks must continually, and critically, reassess their assumptions regarding gender.

With a lawyer’s directness, Thompson (1996 : 44) concisely outlined the problem (this writer’s emphasis):

…artifacts such as jewellery or weapons are invalid indices of the sex of the deceased. Roman records confirm that Celtic men were fond of jewellery and Celtic women served as warriors. In order to identify biological sex, the individual’s pelvic bones and/or skull *must* have survived.

In this, Thompson broadly undermines work performed on the assumption that artefactual sexing is valid. Roman records confirm that Celtic men were fond of jewellery and Celtic women served as warriors. In order to identify biological sex, the individual’s pelvic bones and/or skull *must* have survived.

Bimodal grave good suites are, however, a useful addition to anthropometrics, as broad-based trends throughout cemeteries, regions and timeframes provide a supplemental
index. In the case of badly decomposed remains, certain key items amongst the grave wares may provide a missing clue. E.g., in a Late Hallstatt/Early La Tene era burial from Central Europe, the presence of bronze or slate bangles on both wrists, possibly anklets, presence of a bronze mirror and the absence of a weapon in the grave would indicate that the occupant is female (Arnold, 1991: 369-70). It is easy to see how an index of grave goods would become an often-used tool in areas where the burials have been invaded by groundwater, ice-fracturing or other factors that badly degrade the skeleton, but amongst the European archeological tradition grave goods have become the standard for sexing, with morphological and anthropometric means employed secondarily, and sometimes only in cases of better-preserved skeletons (Effros, 2000).

Witt (1997) said:

Very often, in the case of Iron Age Europe, it is not the skeleton at all that is sexed. The associated goods are still considered diagnostic, and even in cases where a skeleton is preserved, it is often not studied by physical or forensic anthropologists.

Stuttgart Bad-Cannstatt Graves 1 and 2 were elite burials that contained skeletons which would likely have been identified as female except for the presence of spearblades (Arnold, 1991: 370). Their presence coupled with female objects, e.g., hair-ornaments, has lead these graves to be considered gender-indeterminate for many years. By comparison, Steppe burials confidently identified as female may contain a very similar suite, including bangles on both wrists, mirror, spindle, pottery, jewellery and a “hero’s portion,” wine, weapons, and even armour (Rolle, 1989: 88). These latter would be cause for serious paradox in the west, and if such combinations occur, or are recognised to have occurred, may have contributed to the kind of ambiguous status the Stuttgart Bad-Cannstatt burials still occupy.

A recent discovery is a burial in the Scilley Isles which by grave goods is gender-indeterminate because it features both a sword and a mirror (Megaw and Megaw,
2001 : 6). The skeletal materials were in very poor condition and deteriorated beyond the point of meaningful investigation, despite conservation measures (Megaw, pers. comm.). Had the materials been examined by a trained osteologist in situ worthwhile sexing data may have been obtainable. This case illustrates the risk of grave good-sexing, a flawed tool to be used with caution (Adamson, 1999 : 82). This may be compared to the situation amongst the 8th-7th c BC Tuvinian Culture of Siberia where the mirror is confidently considered a unisex artifact (Bokovenko, 1995b : 278).

As these examples demonstrate, there are instances when the traditional European approach is clearly inconsistent with the represented biology, and this is one focus of this study, to illuminate this deficiency and stress the importance that it be redressed. The European record, involving perhaps a large part of the physical evidence from the pioneering work on Celtic civilisation, may well be in dire need of review from this standpoint.

Not all Celtic or other western materials are so affected, of course. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries vigorous osteological work was done on exhumed remains around the world to identify geographic populations by type, and thus trace their spread in space and time, establishing patterns and chronologies for contact, incursion and annexation by contrasting intrusive vs. indigenous populations (Murphy, 2002). Considerable work was done in Ireland until the middle of the 20th century, and we may expect this part of the “Celtic” map to be better serviced with hard data than Gaul.

Finally, the documentary evidence can be in contrast with both direct and indirect methods, in a general sense. As Aedeen Cremin (1992 : 14-15) noted: “Classical authors said that Celtic women were as fierce as their men, and this is sometimes interpreted to mean that women were warriors. The archaeological evidence does not support this notion, for hundreds of burials of Celtic women have been excavated and only a tiny number has produced anything in the way of weapons, but we should note that the very much later Early
Irish laws (eighth century AD) do legislate for women warriors.” Five years later Cremin was more inclined to accept a warrior status for women. James (1993: 67) takes a cautious stance: “The modern notion of Celtic Amazons is more difficult to substantiate: although women were often present on the battlefield, there seems to be no evidence of them bearing arms — except in Dio’s description of Boudicca.” Here we have records perhaps a thousand years apart addressing the same thing from two different perspectives, neither of which the material record reflects, and this again raises the question of whether the failure of the material record to corroborate the texts might not be at least partially due to our interpretation of the materials.

**Case Study: The Vix “Princess” (see map p114)**

When the rich high-status burial (*Furstengrab*) below the hillfort at Mt. Lassios, near Chatillon-sur-Seine, Burgundy, was discovered in January, 1953, controversy surrounded the apparent dichotomy between grave goods of royal calibre surrounding a skeleton which by all accounts (anthropometric and ornamentational) was female.

The tomb’s timber-lined interment chamber, with an area of around 9m², had been invaded by groundwater and the materials were immersed in mud, which made their recovery difficult and arduous, but after meticulous work a number of remarkable artefacts were brought out. Joffroy (1962) listed them, and the materials included the largest wine-mixing *krater* found to date (800-litre capacity, and of foreign manufacture); an exquisite pure gold *torc* assembled from 25 separate elements, originally considered a “diadem” due to its location in proximity to the skull but now properly thought a neck-ring; bronze basins, a bronze Schnabelkanne (beaked flagon), a pair of imported Attic kylikes (drinking vessels) and bowls of silver and ceramic. The deceased, estimated to be between 30 and 35 years of
The rich tomb of the Vix “Princess” is located near the hillfort of Mt. Lassios, and dates from the Hallstatt-La Tene cusp, around 500 BC, a period of great affluence in the heartlands of the tribes the Greeks called the “Keltoi.”

The art of facial reconstruction is widely used in forensic science, and contributes valuable perspective to archaeology. Here, the individual from the Vix tomb is reconstructed by anthropometric techniques by Langlois, part of the 1987 study which fixed the sex of the individual to the satisfaction of most workers. Some 15 years later the sex was established by DNA methods, confirming Langlois’ deductions.

age, lay on her back in the bed of a wagon, the four wheels of which were removed and propped against one wall. The wagon-bier was standard for high-status burials in this period (dated to somewhere around 490 BC, median to a possible timeframe from 500 - 480 BC, therefore in earliest La Tene times.) The personal effects of the individual, in addition to the torc, thought to be an import from Iberia, included eight fibulae, one of which was gold-plated, beads of stone and amber, bracelets of slate, bronze anklets and a bronze ring about the waist. The krater has attracted the lion’s share of attention in the literature over the years, it’s apparent manufacture by Greek craftsmen in the Mediterranean and subsequent transport and assembly in Gaul providing major evidence for a developed trade relationship between “barbarian” and “civilised” Europe in early La Tene times (Arafat and Morgan, 1994). Also, it supported classical references to the Celts’ liking for wine, and bolstered their modern reputation as big drinkers. However, the more important aspect of the Vix tomb concerns the individual, not her status symbols.

Concerning the skeletal materials, the skull was present, and displayed a rarely-mentioned “suppurating head wound,” which while serious was likely not life-threatening and therefore probably not the cause of death (Megaw, 1966). The materials were sexed anthropometrically and therein lay the controversy: the numbers defined this individual as female, but the rich grave good suite had previously only been encountered amongst the Celts in “princely” burials, i.e., chieftains, the rich or the top of the warrior elite in Celtic society. Here was a woman with the things usually indicative of a social “alpha,” and it implied an overturn of the assumption that women were as much goods and chattels in Celtic times as they had been in the Middle Ages. The depth of resistance is difficult to fathom in hindsight: at that time, lone females buried with status goods were hardly unknown from the middle centuries of the 1st Millennium BC, as the material record from Etruria demonstrates (see Chapter Five), and extending this cultural norm north of the Alps in later centuries seems
the simplest solution to the Vix “problem.”

This is a classic example of the conflict of physical evidence with cultural bias. As Cohen and Bennett (1993) point out: “…skeletal data are comparatively immune to distortion by the gender-role expectations of the observer, since much of the analysis can be done by testing procedures that are sex-blind (the known sex of the skeleton can be withheld from individuals making other analyses.)” This is to use a double-blind test to obtain an unbiased analysis, and in this it would seem Joffroy and his followers failed: they made their assumption and defended it in the face of immediately-apparent anthropometric refutation.

Clearly, Joffroy himself had difficulty with the notion that Celtic women could obtain privilege and high status in their society. Boardman (1980 : 221) was satisfied with a diagnosis of female and accepting of the cultural implications for western Europe at the Hallstatt-La Tene cusp, as was Powell as early as 1958 (1958 : 72) but as late as 1983 Konrad Spindler, cited by Bettina Arnold (1991 : 370), believed the skeleton was male; ambiguity stemmed, he claimed, from the standard against which the skull was matched being a “robust Nordic type,” while the skull was also, he felt, comparable to a gracile southern-European male. This is a straightforward observation; however, given the documented physical differences between the Gauls and their southern neighbours, (Strabo speaks of their considerable stature and the emphasis they placed on physical conditioning (Lloyd-Morgan, 1995)) it may also be an irrelevant one (below). In the same paper Spindler advanced the theory, if we may call it that, that the jewellery suite, characteristic of female trends for the temporospatial position, indicated a transvestite status for the individual.

While transvestitism is not unknown in ancient cultures (the obvious example being the Enarees, a priest-caste amongst the Scythians, first described by Herodotus, (Trippett, 1975; Rolle, 1989; Davis-Kimball, 2002, etc.), or the “male priestess” from Tillya Tepe, northern Afghanistan (Davis-Kimball, 2002 : 183)), it is difficult to see Spindler’s argument
as more than an unwillingness to “grasp the nettle” and accept the anthropometric evidence. Langlois’ analysis of 1987 (Arnold, 1991) established the female status of the skull beyond doubt, but we may admit to some justification for Spindler’s caution: he was seeing similarities of the skull to the male gracile Mediterranean type — but this in itself may not be reasonable, as the Classical authors speak of Gaulish women being as big and robust as their men. The skeleton may not have been especially massive but the morphology would certainly follow the overall population trend, thus skull = female Nordic-type. The recorded general Gaulish colouration (blond or red-head) also does not suggest any Mediterranean genetic affiliation, making Spindler’s suggestion further puzzling.

Witt (1997) observes:

The most famous of all ancient Celtic skeletons, the “lady” from Vix … has been subjected to exhaustive anthropological study. The results are anything but reassuring. The skull’s cranial capacity of 1425 cc approaches the modern average European male minimum of 1450 much more closely than the female maximum of 1300. The long bones are less well preserved than the skull, but reconstruction of the left femur suggests a possible body height of between 1.58 and 1.67m (Sauter 1980, 99). Langlois’s 1987 report reevaluates the findings that led Sauter, among others, to question the determinability of the “lady’s” sex, and concludes that they indicate that she was in fact female (212-214). A stumbling block has been the incontestably robust character of the “lady’s” skeleton; more recent study of the Hochdorf chieftain’s remains suggests that the elite among the ancient “Celts” were larger than has been thought in the past. I can see no reason other than modern prejudice that would lead us to expect “Celtic” women to be small and delicate; the classical sources certainly suggest quite otherwise.

The facial tissue was reconstructed from the morphology of the skull by Langlois as part of his 1987 study, allowing an approximate glimpse of the person in life, and she is unquestionably female, quite plain, with a comfortable, familiar, typically western-European cast of features. For a description of the history and process of facial reconstruction see Neave (2000 : 325-333).

This conclusion agrees with the body ornamentation, as the interred individual was wearing anklets. Arnold (1991 : 369) says: “This is an ornament category which is exclusively female; no male burials, regardless of status, have been found to date containing
anklets… The presence of anklets in the Vix grave is one of the most compelling arguments in favor of its interpretation as a female burial.”

The foregoing review of the “Vix controversy” remains germane to the question of bias in the modern scientific mindset, but science has a way of reducing the issues to simpler terms, and the fifty-year history of debate over the individual in the rich tomb at Mount Lassios is now over. Genetic and other investigations have removed any remaining reasonable doubt: the occupant was female beyond question (Rolley, 2003 : 29-56).

With her identity fixed, what are the implications? A female skeleton in proximity to a male skeleton in a rich tomb would traditionally imply merely a consort, like the incredibly rich burial of a Scythian princess unearthed at the Tolstaya mogila (Rolle, 1989); or the spectacular royal burials of “Tomb 98” at Kyogju, Korea, dated to the 5th century AD, one containing a king, treasure and thousands of weapons, the other a queen-consort whose grave goods were little more than 4kg of gold jewellery (Nelson, 1993). There was no male skeleton in the Vix tomb, thus the interpretive difficulty. Aedeen Cremin (1992 : 16) said: “She was buried alone and thus there is no doubt that she is the person for whom the extravagant grave goods were deposited…”

Thus the question of the rich grave goods becomes one of *ascribed* status (the goods were votively placed, or reflected the status of her family or social grouping), or *achieved* status (she was the ruler of her tribe (a western branch of the Sequani, perhaps) and the goods belonged to her, period). This is an old problem, one devolving to archeology from anthropology, and Peebles and Kus (1977) proposed a partial solution in terms of their *superordinate* and *subordinate* dimensions to mortuary practice (quoted in O’Shea, 1984 : 15), on which logic the Vix “Princess” is clearly a ruler.

In contrast, Aedeen Cremin suggested her status may have been one of priestess, and the grave goods were not for her, but for the deity she represented (1992 : 16). This is
prompted by the statuette surmounting the lid of the krater, a “very simply dressed woman with her hands outstretched, surely more a priestess than a princess.” While a possibility, this writer finds this proposal thin at best. The krater was made by Greek craftsmen and the figures around the neck of the vessel are of traditional Greek form; we may reasonably expect such craftsmen to depict a female form if not demurely then with restraint, as a flamboyantly presented woman would be, to them, not royalty but *hetairai* — a prostitute. It is also merely an assumption that the figure represents the inhumed individual rather than some vague idealizing of the female form, and this writer sees no basis for it.

Again, time adjusts perspective, and in her 1997 work, *The Celts* (p27) Cremin states:

> In eastern France and southern Germany during the fifth and fourth centuries BC several women were buried alone in magnificent tombs with outstanding art treasures and all the trappings of royalty. There is every reason to suppose these women were rulers in their own right, free to purchase or commission the luxury goods which were necessary to mark their high status in a carefully stratified society.

Perhaps the operative word here is *several*: a pattern emerges and the weight of evidence increases in support of the simplest explanation.

That the richness of her burial is comparatively rare is either an accurate statement of conditions in early La Tene Europe, or reflects merely the incompleteness of our record. Such a record is never likely to be complete in an absolute sense, but in the scope of the existing materials no other Celtic woman is known to have been interred with quite such extravagant riches. There are however other female elite burials featuring both vehicles and weapons, e.g., the previously-mentioned Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt elite graves 1 and 2, in which the presence of spearblades conflicts with that of gold hair ornaments, and Ludwig Pauli (cited in Arnold, 1991 : 370) applied the transvestite explanation to account for this. Similarly, the individual interred in the Kleinaspergle tumulus, opened in 1879, though most often considered female, has long been gender-ambiguous, due to sparse grave goods, an absence of weapons but the presence of a major drinking-set.
Given the propensity for material-based sexing in the European experience, it may be worth reexamining other “princely” burials, a call made by Arnold (1991: 373), and reiterated by Witt (1997) in her Ph.D. Dissertation: it is not unrealistic to suppose that surprises might await discovery in the existing material record, and this prompting forms a key element of the current study. Arnold’s call went unheeded however, as did her application of Okham’s Razor to the effect that women of status in the European Iron Age was a simpler and therefore more likely explanation for the conflict between expectations and the material evidence than a “third, ambiguous gender” proposed by both Konrad Spindler and Ludwig Pauli.

**Case Study: The Warrior Priestess of Issyk (see map p42)**

The attitude governing the initial misconceptions in the above case is of course found elsewhere. In 1970 Soviet archeologist Kemal A. Akishev opened a rich kurgan in the seven-rivers area south of Lake Balkhash, in Kazakhstan (the territory of the ancient Saka, adjoining the Altai Mountains region directly east). Though most of the rich mounds in the area had been systematically plundered by the *bugrovshchiki* (professional tomb robbers), an untouched chamber was found in the flank of a great ‘czar’ kurgan at Issyk, 50km to the east of the town of Alma-Ata (post-Soviet = Almaty). The inner timber tumulus had rotted and the tomb was filled with earth, the soil invading the fir-log sarcophagus whose top had also deteriorated, and crushed the organic matter, but careful excavation exposed a trove of pristine artefacts, including four thousand gold plaques. The occupant was identified as a “prince,” and had been buried with trappings of amazing opulence.

The catalog of artefacts is remarkable: twin iron swords (one short, one long) in gold-encrusted scabbards; a whip; a tall, conical headdress of cultic significance; the caftan-style jacket was covered with 2400 triangular gold plaques forming scale-mail, as
were the boots. Gold plaques adorned the belt, a gold torc circled the neck. A gilded bronze mirror, a silver spoon with stylised handle and an implement used to whisk koumiss, the fermented mare’s milk drunk on the steppes to the present day, were also present and these also are classed with the cultic materials of the region.

Leather breeches were an assumption in Akishev’s restoration (Davis-Kimball, 2002: 105), a skirt is equally possible for cultic attire, corroborated by other Saka graves in which fabrics are known, though given the preponderance in horse-using cultures breeches are a fair bet irrespective of the gender of the individual (i.e., they were practical — though in this instance the headdress was clearly ceremonial, so the rest of the costume may also have been aesthetic rather than functional).

Since the publication of Renate Rolle’s seminal work in the 1980s, this individual has been reassessed and is now cautiously considered a “warrior priestess” of the Saka, part of an identifiable caste of Saka society (Davis-Kimball, 2002: 105). Interestingly, this reassessment itself is based on the grave goods: the skeletal materials do not appear to have been kept, at least the repository of the Almaty Museum, Kazakhstan, can no longer locate materials attributable to this grave, following a laboratory relocation (thus the cautionary caveat). Davis-Kimball (pers. comm.) compared grave goods in the collections of some twelve museums and established a suite that held good across the region, and under which the Issyk individual classes out as female (e.g., mirror and spindle-whorl, gold and turquoise earrings and carnelian beads accompanied the body, as well as the warrior and cultic accouterments listed above. It is also a signifier that cultic garb and artefacts are found only in female graves in this region and timeframe). The person was originally measured at 162.5cm (5’4”) tall, and the incomplete skeleton is recorded to have been of small/slight proportions. Akishev originally ascribed this stature to youthfulness, but an identification of female is also tentatively appropriate from an anthropometric standpoint, vague as the
Davis-Kimball was hesitant to publish her interpretation, but when she did so (Davis-Kimball, 1997) peer response was quite positive. Indeed, the anthropologist who had originally examined the skeletal material confided at that time that he had been unable to determine sex conclusively and the presence of the swords, more than anything else, had influenced the original conclusion (2002:106).

Case Studies: Discussion

What did those steppe culture female roles mean to the conservative Greek world? Herodotus was writing in the mid-5th c BC and at this time in the heartland of Greek culture, Athens, the role of women was growing ever most constrained, legally and morally, tightening down into a segregation and “guardianship” situation analogous to the Muslim zanaan (Murray, 1986:206) By the time of Pericles Athenian women had essentially no public options, and might easily be distinguished from female “non-citizens” who could walk abroad in the streets of Athens or the countryside.

To an elite literate audience, many of whom had a mindset that fostered a strongly subservient female status, Herodotus introduced an image of women who were blooded in battle by the age of 15, who had the lightning mobility of cavalry and the lethal reach of the bow — the same kind of cavalry tactics that had made a mockery of the 700000-man army of Darius II in 514 BC when he attempted to bring Scythia under his dominion (having succeeded some five years earlier in defeating the Sakas of King Skuka) — sneering at the very same gigantic infantry formations that were the core of Persian tactics and which had cost the Greeks so dearly in the Persian Wars a generation later. Surely these were no women the cultured Athenian wanted to meet, nor even believe existed. Indeed, Herodotus tells us the Sarmatians ("Sauromatae") were one of only three peoples who elected to band with the
Paralatae in their action against the Persians, and though he makes no statement one way or the other, it would be difficult to envision a Sarmatian cavalry force whose number did not include women. There was a time the very name implied something close to matriarchy:

Moshkova (1995 : 87) says:

[D. A. Machinsky] asserts that although from the 4th through 2nd centuries BC authors differentiated between “Sirmatian,” “Sarmatian,” and GYNAIKOKPATOYMENO (female dominated) these three names were synonymous beginning in the late 2nd century BC.

So, we have two key instances to consider, the Vix Princess (unambiguously supporting high status females amongst the Celts) and Central Asian female weapon graves (evidencing female warrior strata amongst the Steppe cultures) — two cases in which the direct historical approach proved inadequate. It failed to predict their existence, and it struggled to account for them when they were revealed.

Why? The answer seems simple in retrospect — not the failure of the method itself, but of its application, which, governed by social bias, is the product of thinking within a mindset bequeathed to us by the same Classical civilisation that was terrified of independent women to begin with. Clearly, a better methodology is desirable, and modern archaeology has already cast off many of the shackles that once needed transvestitism to explain a woman buried — alone — with wealth or weapons.

The case studies above illustrate this change of attitudes over time. The waning of the patriarchal mindset that governed much of archaeological and anthropological thinking in the past (Trigger, 1989) is allowing reinterpretation of materials to occur. To what extent is this bias still current? If the trend can survive the antifeminist politics of the “old brigade” we may see a post-processual reevaluation of this issue take place in Europe. The classic models of gender role dispersal outside the territories and periods of Greek and Roman colonial influence may shift somewhat as provenance previously considered inadmissible testimony
comes under serious consideration.

The following chapter considers the revision of theory to accommodate a world view at variance with orthodox models of gender role behavior. The environment of the debate is outlined, including its social ramifications for our own culture. This is placed in historic perspective by analysis of gender role models in the Etruscan, Greek and Roman worlds, which formed the basis of our own traditional mores, and the conflict of gender-based norms between androcentric and gender-equivalent social models is assessed. In this frame of reference, a new procedural model for analysis of archeological remains is proposed.
Chapter Five:

New Synthesis

On the basis of the studies above, is there room for a new synthesis providing a fresh framework for assignment of gender, or redefining gender stereotypes, in ancient cultures?

One might reasonably ask why, in the face of anthropometric evidence accumulated over decades and in many parts of the world, it is even necessary to ask that question at this time. But anthropometrics establish physical sex, and, as the lesson of the Central Asian horse tribes underscores, social gender, an abstraction, is not obliged to coincide with the sex of an individual, no matter how much archaeologists in the past might have wanted it to. The world is not linear and its relationships are profoundly fluid, and though general trends in human society can be seen in widespread commonality across space and time, significant variation is inevitable, and gender role-availability is one such area.

Modern interpretive difficulty is not so much about ambiguity in the material or documentary record as it is about atavism in the beholder. There is a school of thought that holds that human culture with respect to gender roles has not changed significantly at any point in our tenure (Hodder, 1986), and “evidence” to the contrary is merely a misinterpretation of available data, or the product of insufficient data. The opposing school of thought accepts the available physical evidence and interprets its social implications. Both schools have a contemporary political agenda which is inseparable, but it is at least possible in the current social and academic climate to minimise bias, or at least place that bias in a clear context of its own.

With the significant change toward gender-role-equality that has developed in the past two generations, Feminist archeology may be viewed with some justification as being fully as politically motivated as Marxist, Nazi or any other form of investigation which seeks
validation in the past for motivating factors in the present. But such statements can by their nature be obfuscatory: that a political agenda is involved does not automatically invalidate an assumption.

What does it mean if one doctrine or the other should enjoy general acceptance? Is this merely academic tinkering, removed from everyday life, or has it implications for the future course of society?

If the conservatists’ viewpoint is upheld, then a status quo is achieved, and any creditable evidence of “warrior women” is compartmentalized as isolated aberrations from a universal norm, and therefore inspiration for no more than a “lunatic fringe.” If the liberal viewpoint can be supported beyond reasonable doubt, then a major historic precedent is established for women enjoying equal access to the resources of their societies, including access to the power-structures affecting their own well-being, i.e., self-determination. This is clearly supportive of the women’s political trend of the last two generations, and reinforces its agenda.

A third possibility in assimilating the impact of this debate is concerned more with the nature of contemporary scientific methodology. In further illuminating the inherent conflicts between documentary and material evidence, and offering an interpretive slant, it expands the role of historical archaeology with the important discriminative function of identifying bias in ancient documentation in relation to overall trends.

But the politics are inseparable and permeate the environment of debate. Roberta Gilchrist (1991 : 499) provided a pertinent summation:

While archaeology now acknowledges “women” as forming a topic for analysis, many observers remain intolerant: they caricature such endeavours as part of the lunatic fringe. Few practitioners are pledged to discover mother goddesses, and where the female figurine is the centre of analysis, studies aim to examine patterns in society and belief. Most are dedicated to redressing the balance of content and coverage within archaeological textbooks. Can a “missionary purpose” yield balanced interpretations? Or do alternative archaeologies consist of nothing more than an uncritical revision of history to suit contemporary politics?
Gender in the Greek, Roman and Etruscan Worlds

The precursor cultures to modern Western culture provide a historical orientation to the environment in which the modern gender roles debate is taking place. In a sense, we are still encountering the same situation the Greeks faced 25 centuries ago when their solid patriarchy was met with the paradox of the Sarmatians and others: a violent reaction to a different, “alien,” social order that suggests customary assumptions may be in error, that the frame of reference on which a world order is based is merely one set of assumptions, not the only possible set. It frightened the Greeks, it shook their world view, and the mythological expression of their biases has coloured our thinking to this day. In every myth, however, is a grain of truth, and it is easy to see how the co-ed Sarmatian cavalry with their mobility, deadly archery and live-off-the-land nomadism would have so terrified the sedentary Greeks that embellished stories would spring up and take hold. Women who are a match for proud Greek sons on the battlefield? It would be so unthinkable to those who, at that time, were more and more relegating their womenfolk to a zanaan existence (Murray, 1986 : 206-210) that its conscious denial and demonization are easily understandable.

In Hellenistic and later Classical times, Greek gender attitudes did not change at a fundamental level, though the constraints upon women increased over time. Davies (1984 : 312) states:

For all the abilities and political importance of some Hellenistic queens, and in spite of the occasional appearance of women making epidoseis or loans to the state, receiving ranks and honours in public decrees, or contributing creatively to intellectual and artistic life, most women remained almost totally confined to the private and household domain. As in the classical period, they remained the transmitters of citizen status and rights without being able to exercise their privileges themselves, and in Greece and in all Greek-style documents from Egypt women continued to need their oldest adult male agnates to act as their guardian-representatives … in all transactions of consequence. Yet there were signs of emancipation. Just as the convergence between magistracy and liturgy allowed gods to be named as magistrates (the implication being that the expenses of the office for the year were met from temple funds), so too women very occasionally appear as magistrates, no doubt for the same financial reasons. Moreover, for the everyday business of getting a living (contracts, sales, leases), the presence and authority of a male kyrios could be de facto purely nominal. Again, the formal format of marriage developed variations. In its classical Athenian form marriage was a relationship between two men,
the husband and father of the bride, created by pledge (engye) and treating her solely as the object and transmitter of rights, transferred from one kyrios to another with the father retaining some residual rights for the bride’s own protection.

That the Romans perpetuated something of this attitude, if not so stridently, e.g., the ‘guardianship’ of women by their male relatives, is also understandable, as they took on board so much of Greek culture in the following centuries, albeit probably ameliorated by the Etruscan foundations of their own society. This is also a happenstance of the politics of its own age: we may speculate that if the Tarquin Kings of Etruria had given rise to the Roman state in a less tumultuous way, perhaps Roman society would have been based more closely on that original Etruscan model instead, in which women are purported to have revelled with the gusto of Celts, while women were excluded from after-dinner drinking in Rome (Warde Fowler, 1908 : 282). The flow-on to that may have been that our society received a transmission of customs in which gender-appropriate behaviour was somewhat different.

To be objective, how much contrast is evidenced between Greek, Etruscan and Roman gender norms, and how reliable are the sources?

Murray (1986 : 206) argues:

[A] … function of the family raises one of the central problems of our understanding of Athenian social values: the family clearly served as the means of protecting and enclosing women. Women were citizens, with certain cults reserved for them and not allowed to foreign women, and they were citizens for the purpose of marriage and procreation; but otherwise they lacked all independent status. They could not enter into any transaction worth more than one medimnos of barley; they could not own any property, with the conventional exception of their clothes, their personal jewellery and their personal slaves. At all times they had to be under the protection of a kyrios, a guardian… At all times the woman belonged to a family and was under the legal protection of its head.

This extravagance did not of course apply to peasant women (or slaves) who worked the land alongside men at the base of the organisational pyramid which supported a middle and upper class which could afford to cosset a full half of its population.

Concerning Etruria, Macnamara (1973 : 168-169) states:
There can be no doubt that Etruscan ladies were given a place in society which was not enjoyed by those of Greece or Rome in the early Republican days. Their status is indicated by the wealth they possessed, from the time of *Larthia*, buried in the Regolini-Galassi Tomb at the middle of the seventh century BC, and on down the generations, as well as the place of honour often reserved for them in the tombs. We may also turn to the few stories we possess of Etruscan women, chiefly told of the wives of the Tarquins by Roman authors, who found it extremely hard to imagine behaviour so different from their own ideals of womanly propriety.

Again we are faced with the layer of filtration imposed by the retelling of these stories by later writers, with the inevitable shading of matters by intrusion of contemporary attitudes. Some sources are widely considered suspect — Theopompus, for instance — though the general sweep of Roman scandal at Etruscan gender norms is far too familiar in the context of Roman views on Celts to accept the accounts without similar discriminatory considerations. Macnamara continues:

The comparative freedom of women within society is well attested by the monuments. Women are shown dining with their husbands, reclining upon the same couch, and also attending the games, sometimes even taking the place of honour. Indeed, such customs scandalized the Greeks, who repeated scurrilous anecdotes of Etruscan immorality. Theopompus, who was said to have had one of the wickedest tongues in antiquity, told of beautiful Etruscan women who exercised naked, who dined with men who were not their husbands, who drank to excess and were so promiscuous that they brought up their children in common, not knowing who the fathers might be. The men felt no shame in committing the sexual act in public and, moreover, enjoyed homosexual more than heterosexual relations.

This description sounds rather like a commune of the 1960s and 1970s, an ‘alternate’ lifestyle that scandalized a modern society whose views were, by and large, very Roman. And, as with Aristotle’s or Diodorus Siculus’s tales of the Celtic world, homosexuality is offered as a “badge of unworthiness,” a biting irony given the modern vernacular meaning of the very word “Greek” (*amor Graecum*, in Latin). Macnamara’s concluding comments offer perspective:

…The evidence of the monuments amply demonstrates, however, that Theopompus’ charges are no more than salacious gossip. Not only do the funerary inscriptions show a very strong pride in the family but a clear ideal of married love is expressed in the effigies of affectionate married couples, which we see on some of the sarcophagi.
From the contemporary perspective one might ask if the artistic record and the “gossip” are strictly incompatible, given the variety that exists across the demographic divisions of a society. Indeed, the fluidity of normative states in any society not subject to a rigid codification of behaviour is considerable, and we paint extinct cultures with too broad a brush if we expect any account to apply generally across the population. Notwithstanding, Theopompus’ clumsy wit today reads like a second-string critic struggling to find something to hate about a foreign play, and such ridicule was hardly omnidirectional: the Romans considered Greek culture post- the defeat of the last Greek army by Rome in 169 BC, to be soft, debauched, effeminate and subservient (Rawson, 1992 : 4).

The material record of Etruria, as Macnamara points out, is hardly ambiguous. Von Vacano (1960 : 29) describes the Etruscans as a society of cosmopolitan people and attitudes, whose artworks seem to illustrate many physical types. It is perhaps unsurprising that gender equality should flourish in such a diverse culture. Flourish it clearly did: the above-mentioned Regolini-Galassi tomb, near Cerveteri, opened in 1836, was a narrow T-shaped chamber beneath a modest burial mound, containing a fabulously rich suite of grave goods surrounding a lone female inhumation (a wagon-burial, conceptually equivalent to the Vix tomb). This is the famous “Larthia,” her name known from accompanying inscriptions but who is not mentioned in any surviving documents from the period (early 7th c BC). Niches to right and left of the tomb entrance held other burials, the right-hand niche containing the ashes of what Von Vacano (1960 : 91) interpreted as a “noble warrior,” perhaps an escort for the deceased to the next world. It is significant that it was the woman who was interred intact.

NB: Wagon-burial in Etruria represents the influence of Celtic Europe on the south, as wagon burials are also known from the Golasecca Culture which formed the mercantile bridge between these two cultures in the 7th c BC.

Similarly, the “Bocchoris Tomb,” opened in April, 1895, contained another extremely
A rich collection of mostly Egyptian imported luxury wares, dated by a balsam jar to the brief reign of the Pharaoh Bekenranef (734 - 728 BC). The trove again surrounded a lone female, so we may infer from these examples alone that women were able to enjoy high status and probably amass great individual wealth within the structure of Etruscan social norms.

Supported by documentary evidence, female status in Etruria becomes an important example in the study of ancient gender relations. Von Vacano (1960 : 85) says:

…the manner of the lying-in-state and the accompanying gifts confirm the reports which say that Etruscan women, in contrast with Greek women, played a full part in public life and were the object of great consideration far beyond the domestic field. Later inscriptions indicate that children could bear the name of their mother alongside their father’s family name.

Communication between Greek and Etruscan cultures was intimate and ongoing. Boardman (1980 : 199 - 206) describes stylistic influences and references to Greek craftsmen of note who immigrated to Etruria especially to supply the local demands. Notable is the apparent fact that while Etruria’s appetite for widely diverse foreign luxuries was bottomless, the mostly Greek merchants who satisfied that demand filtered effectively any cross-pollination of Etruscan attitudes to race and gender. Inverse-acculturation was not allowed to occur, and this seems to have been essentially the case in Massaliote relations with the Celts in Gaul, a function of the older, more formalised social structure of the Greeks resisting the more liberal outlook of other societies.

Continuing with this comparison, to what degree did gender behaviour differ between the much better-known Greek and Roman cultures? In contrast to the Greek and Etruscan extracts above, this is the text of the single page devoted to Roman women’s status, in Boardman, Griffin and Murray’s *The Roman World* (1986b : 206):

The women of the community would generally be seen in terms of the socio-economic categories assigned to the men. Their rights at law were however much more extensive than one might have expected, the institution of ‘guardianship’ of adult women, though it was not abolished, having by the late second century become a formality. It is already clear in the late Republic that women of senatorial status could in practice manage their own business and financial affairs, and with the early and almost universal acceptance
of a form of marriage in which the woman retained her own legal identity rather than passing into the control of her husband, women had rights to own, inherit, and dispose of property which in modern Britain were not matched until the Married Women’s Property Act of 1870.

The marriage of Pudentilla of Tripolitanian Oea to the young philosopher Apuleius in the mid second century was the occasion of a princial cause celebre from which Apuleius, accused before the proconsul by her first husband’s relatives of having bewitched her by magic arts, was no doubt glad to escape. Pudentilla had for her part gone against their expressed wishes in choosing to marry Apuleius, which she was perfectly able to do. The real issue was that of the property, and Pudentilla’s ‘guardian’ had to certify in court that the farm whose purchase he had formally authorized had been acquired not for Apuleius but for herself.

At less opulent social levels women are found frequently, in evidence that seriously under-represents their actual numbers, sharing in their husbands’ work and its organization, particularly in the finer crafts and luxury trades such as silver-working and perfumery; and there were of course those service occupations in which opportunities to make a living, and even to achieve a certain scandalous distinction, conflicted with a social disapproval that was itself, as we should expect, shaped by that essential tool of a dominant class, moral hypocrisy. An early fourth century law on adultery took it for granted that the mistress of a tavern need not have sexual relations with the male clientele, while the serving-maids would normally be expected to, and so, unlike their mistress, were exempt from accusation as being ‘unworthy of the cognizance of the laws’; and the same assumption was applied to women of the stage, whose immorality was held, again in Christian legislation of the fourth century, to preclude their returning to the profession after baptism.

The social role of the woman was dominant, above all, in the home and in the day-to-day upbringing of children. The most intimate, if not the most endearing portrayal of this relationship, as of many other aspects of provincial family life, is Augustine’s description of his mother Monica in the Confessions. It is not exclusively as an expression of personal affection, but of the normal patterns of family life in ancient cities, that Augustine’s relations with his mother were so intense, and with his father so formal and distant by comparison.

That a single page was devoted to the subject in a 400+ page textbook is itself significant, and parallels the single page in Cunliffe’s 1997 work The Ancient Celts (quoted on p35) in which it was only possible to reiterate the bare bones of the status of Celtic women transmitted to us by the Romans, and leaving aside the Brehon Laws whose origins invite debate on the question of the ascription of Celtic civilization to the British Isles. The key difference here is that Roman civilization is attested by an enormous weight of surviving documentation, while the Celtic world is supported by almost none — yet in each case a discussion of women’s roles still merits only one page. This itself may be a reflection of the
generally minimal importance our society has traditionally placed on women in the historical context, *i.e.*, the view that history is a chronology of events shaped by and concerning men, within which the doings of women are unimportant details (Conkey and Spector, 1984, cited in Hays-Gilpin and Whitley, 1998 : 14).

So, in a comparison of Etruria, Greece and Rome, we see a conflux of morality, politics, power structures, wealth-distribution, bloodline-safeguarding, inheritance structures, all quantities applicable to any society. The role of women as transmitters of bloodline seems to have been central to most such structures, and the degree of freedom, social and political, women were able to hold onto varied over time, decreasing from the Etrurian period with an increasing weight of abstract morality governing behavior. This is the model for the Mediterranean world, which, in barely modified form, has been transmitted to ourselves, and with which any “new synthesis” must contend directly.

*Environment of the Modern Debate*

Perhaps every age feels it has the “best” ability to understand or interpret information, or to make judgments about other ages and peoples. As Willey and Sabloff (1993) commented, “Each period of time appears to have derived its own “truth” in reference to its own social framework.” But, considering the corpus of knowledge now available, it may be more than conceit to say that we can reasonably comprehend the motivations and needs of the cultures we are considering. Have we evolved a mindset that can comfortably dismiss as paranoia the imperative viewpoints of our own immediate past? In a great many ways, yes, but it has taken a long time to evolve. As recently as 1991, when Walde and Willows edited *The Archeology of Gender*, the female warrior graves of the Ukraine that had been described a decade earlier, and presaged the imminent excavations in Kazakhstan, did not merit editorial mention. They were also omitted from editorial comment in Hays-Gilpin and Whitley’s *Reader in Gender*

Why? Probably because they remained too contentious for inclusion in a mainstream publication, or, at least, too shrouded in the knee-jerk reactions of society to a concept which has been traditionally mythologised. Also, it may be that gender archaeologists prefer to distance themselves from feminist archaeology’s “purple light” subject.

The “need” for the independent and self-determinant women to be implicitly and explicitly mythological, and specifically no more than an aberration in the psychology of the insecure male mind, has been academically rehashed from Rothery (1910) to Tyrrell (1984) and Westra (1991). Despite being eight decades apart and independently scholarly, these works reach the same conclusion for the same reason: in their view it is fundamentally unreasonable to equilibrate the genders in the determinant context of (some abstract, archetypal) human culture, because it denies the evidence of supportable history (thus validating “everyday experience”) — the main difference being that Rothery was referring broadly and implicitly to Edwardian England, while Westra, after Tyrrell, at least examined the contemporaneous Athenian mindset. Westra also examined Greek myth as a discrete unit, divorced from broader ethnicities, while Rothery examined all prominent female social structures under one comprehensive banner.

Consider these statements:

From Rothery (1910 : 11):

Of the historic Amazon little need be said for the moment. Under stress, human nature is very much to-day what it was yesterday and will be to-morrow; and woman, being woman, under stress is very apt to exaggerate human passions. It would be idle and tedious to labour the point which myth and history illustrate so well.

This is an appeal to everyday experience from the comfortable standpoint of a dominant social stratum. Then, from his conclusions, speculating about isolated female communities which had evolved independent identity (1910 : 211):

Adamson/Gender in Nonliterate Cultures/135
Under these circumstances, communication between the sexes would arise only gradually, and be of a spasmodic, even of a clandestine nature, until the inevitable day when the women surrendered to the men on the latter’s own terms; for such is the predestined fate of all such “commonwealths,” ancient or modern. But, given a mountainous country, or a district covered with primeval forest, and obstinate resistance, the women tribe would soon be regarded as something outside of nature, either to be cursed or fought, and almost certainly to be looked upon with a mixture of dread and veneration.

The paranoias of strongly gender-stratified cultures are at work in these words, as much in twentieth century England as in Classical Athens. They define the weight of prejudice under which the modern investigator labours, and explain the reluctance of the emerging gender-archaeology establishment to draw attention to the widespread female warrior role amongst the Steppe cultures. The mythological association remains so powerful that the material record must struggle for credibility.

And from Westra (1991: 343-345):

What we can establish without too much doubt is the role the Amazons played in the Athenian view of themselves, their society and their history … an abomination to the Greeks, something very threatening that needed to be eradicated… [T]his is the ultimate function of the myth … namely to validate patriarchal Greek society, especially the institution of marriage, by presenting Amazonian society as an inverted mirror image of Greek society.

When the Amazons get to Greece, they finally meet “real men” in Athens, who restore the norm by exterminating them, i.e., by obliterating the very notion of female Supremacy.

From the twenty-first century perspective the insecurity and bigotry of the Athenian patriarchs Westra describes seems profound, implying as they do not only their view on gender primacy, but the arrogance of their attitude that all other nations were degenerate, and of less threat or importance than women.

Rothery, in contrast, is often difficult to interpret. His scholarship is alternately well-read and as flawed as that of Ignatius Donnelley, and the overriding views of his age — racism, sexism, and the neo-Darwinian view that evolution’s end product was his contemporary British culture — often render his arguments to the status of period-pieces. The citations above are 81 years apart, and say the same thing, that the Classical social status quo
is perceived to be the “natural” order of being and that anything to the contrary is a temporary aberration and/or mythological. Powerful queens and competent female warriors did not, at least in Rothery’s view, constitute significant deviations from it. Rothery more than once cites matriarchy and matrilineal descent as ancient cultural models made “obsolete” by social evolution (echoed by Westra’s citation (1991: 343) of “Bachofen’s notion of “Amazonism” as a structural phase in the development of human society”), and that the female warriors he recognised in a historic context were the products of fanatical religious models all of which possessed a male anchoring authority. We may see this as the Edwardian mindset coping with the ‘paradox’ of female independence, while Westra specifically analysed Athenian insecurities and their mythological security-blanket.

It is also worth noting that though Westra comfortably dismisses notions of female mounted warriors in Western Asia/Eurasia as the product of neurotic minds, twenty-eight pages later in the same volume Bettina Arnold refers to them in the factual context of Renate Rolle’s excavations in the Ukraine (1991: 373). This writer is surprised that the editors left Westra’s paper unamended in this respect: as a review of Athenian misogyny it remains highly relevant, though in retrospect its broader implications require clearer historic and ethnological boundaries. And, almost paradoxically, Rothery was aware of the mounted female warriors of the Sauro-Sarmatian culture (accepting Herodotus at face value, however, and thus bereft of the modern material context), providing a review of these and other instances of female warriors, both historically attested and otherwise. Even further parallel between these works can be found in the fact the greatest relevance of Rothery’s work today is as a study of Edwardian bigotry.

Ingrained attitudes are sometimes overwhelmingly difficult to influence. As late as the mid-1990s some workers prefered a votive explanation over a functional one. In reference to Early Sarmatian graves and the continuance of traditions from Sauromatian times,
Barbarunova (1995 : 124) said: “The ancient tradition of burying women with arrowheads and, less frequently, a sword still survived as rudimentary cultic practice.” In the same paper, however, she attaches no cultic significance to the suite of common artifacts Davis-Kimball formalised as a consistent cultic maker throughout the region.

A further note on the “Athenian misogynist” origin for the “Amazon myth” concerns precedent. Depictions of “Amazons” first appear in Greek art in the 7th c BC, just postdating the post-Mycenaen dark age, and pre-dating the calcified Athenian zanaan system by two hundred years or more. At this early date, if these depictions are in any sense based on tales of some historic people, those people are probably Sauromatians — or some as-yet undefined ethnic identity. Greek settlement on the Black Sea coast had possibly commenced as early as this (Boardman, 1980 : 240; Melyukova, 1995 : 34), though exploratory voyages at an earlier date are highly probable, and interactions with the Scythians would provide one possible vector for transmission of these accounts. Tales to frighten the civilized Athenian in centuries to come may have originated with encounters between colonials or explorers as far east as the Don River and westerly patrols of Sauromatian cavalry. The Greek capacity to illustrate the facts, perhaps as great as the celebrated embellishments of Celtic bards, would do the rest.

What value can we place on everyday experience? It is normal, natural, comfortable, familiar — and limited to our immediate sphere of perception.

“Everyday experience” is the epiphenomenon of culture, which predetermines gender roles, stereotypes acceptable behaviors, prescribes access to resources and legislates to enforce much of this weight of “custom,” irrespective of the potential wishes, needs or aspirations of those affected by it. To cite “everyday experience” as the foundation for the “intuitively obvious,” is, in this case, circular reasoning, and devoid of merit. Nevertheless, archaeology has at times embraced this model, for familiar reasons. Ian Hodder (1986 : 169) argues: “…archaeologists have tended to view the past sexual division of labour as similar to
that of the present… This sex-linking of past activities makes present sexual relations seem inevitable and legitimate.” This observation echoes Rothery’s pedantry in the accusative sense.

In discussion of gender-attributed artefact suites, Roberta Gilchrist (1991 : 498) takes succinctly to task the “appeal to the normal” which the arguments above represent:

Although … binary oppositions are viewed as socially constructed, they suggest a universal contradiction between male and female cultural categories. This pairing of male and female structural oppositions negates alternative gender constructions, such as transsexualism and, in certain societies, the existence of eunuchs as a third gender. Is male-female the only standard structure to be expected in the gender relations of past societies?

Gender archaeologists have struggled against essentialism, in terms of universal male and female oppositions, and the cross-cultural subjectivity attributed to being a man or woman in each and every society.

Murray, in Boardman et al., (1986a : 210), speaks to concepts of normative behaviour across cultures, apropos of the Athenian zanaan:

It is not easy to come to terms with such attitudes, however common they may be in peasant societies, if only because we idealize the Greeks as the originators of western civilization. But we should remember that (polygamy apart) the position of Athenian women was in most important respects the same as that of the 200,000,000 women who today live under Islam, and that in the history of the world only communism and the advanced capitalist societies have made any pretense of treating men and women equally.

The glimpse of the Irish Celtic world afforded by the Brehon Laws, and their possible implications for the society of the ancestral Celts of mainland Europe, are outside the sphere of these comments, as are the implications of later material finds on the Steppes, and Murray’s statement might be amplified to say that the Athenian woman was a prisoner of her own culture, while her sisters far to the east and west, under the influence of the imperatives of both nomadization (steppe peoples) and a society in which luxury and status did not breed an indolent class (Celts), maintained an independence that likely scorned the Athenian brand of civilization — at least in its attitude to half the population. We can justifiably speculate that Minoan society would have viewed Classical Athens as a degenerate form of itself.
Let us postulate the “everyday experience” of another culture for a moment. Religious traditions offer different lifestyles to different peoples; differing natural resources offer different ratios of labour-to-leisure time, thus fostering varying degrees of possible sophistication in artistic or other non-subsistence activities, again offering contrast in lifestyle for the populations; and amongst any such activities, while there may be gender-associated tasks, those tasks are not bound to equate between different cultures.

For instance, in Celtic (Lloyd-Morgan, 1995 : 98-100), steppe cultures (Davis-Kimball, 2002 : 29), (where spindle whorls are associated only with female burials), Viking (as evidenced by the looms in the female Oseberg tomb (Jesch, 1991) and the plethora of textile implements associated with female inhumations, especially in western Norway; Dommasne, 1991) and Aztec societies (McCafferty and McCafferty, 1991), weaving was a woman’s trade. But amongst the late Basket-Weaver/early Pueblo peoples of the American Southwest, weaving was a male-dominated occupation, carrying down, along with knitting, to the Hopi in the modern age (O’Kane, 1953) and contrasting with their Navajo neighbours in which it was a female trade (Binford, 1983). Herodotus (II/35) tells us it was a male occupation in Egypt, contrasting with his native Ionia.

In Pueblo culture, a non-literate society in the American Southwest in the early centuries of the 2nd Millennium AD, clan bloodlines were transmitted matrilineally despite the culture being nominally patriarchal. Though much labour seems to have been gender-communal, harvesting was a male task and the processing of grain and baking were female labour (Sando, 1976). This may have been simply a logical matter of physical strength.

Did women do the baking of bread north of the Alps? Men ran the commercial bakeries of Athens and Rome (though according to Pliny (Warde Fowler, 1908 : 48)
PLATE #7 SEXUAL DIVISION OF LABOUR

All over the world, various tasks are gendered, assigned customarily to male or female labour. Here are examples of weaving, often a female trade (though a male trade in India and Egypt in the 1st millennium BC. The upper example is one of S. M. Dudin's photographs taken in Central Asia in 1899, showing Kazakh women working at a ground loom, while the lower shows a Navajo woman working at a vertical loom, ca 1935. The social tradition of weaving as a female task conjoins these peoples, though 10000km and 18000 years (allowing for the displacement of Native American peoples from their Asian forebears via the Beringia migrations) separate them.

commercial bakeries, operated by non-slave labour, did not appear in Rome until 171 BC, prior to which all baking was private, and expressly a female task. Organized business may be the operative factor in this latter distinction, however, and a better analogy may be to the private kitchens of the citizens of the Mediterranean: did male or female slaves do the baking? This latter was likely the case in Minoan Crete, though in a communal rather than private context: Palmer (1963a: 118) comments on a particular Linear B tablet from Knossos interpreted to indicate that women had been transferred to baking duties in an emergency, suggesting a male(slave)-dominated trade.

Palmer (1963b) offers more detail of the engenderment of industry in Minoan Crete:

Both men and women were engaged in the manufacture of cloth. One interesting fact is that the men appear to have worked in pairs… This links up with an illustration from an Egyptian tomb which shows two men sitting side by side at a vertical loom. This is stated to be a new type of loom which appears in the paintings of the New Kingdom from c. 1580. ‘On this loom, for the first time, the weavers are almost all men!’

Clearly, these are cultural variations, as different weight or significance is allotted to certain tasks, though cultural assumptions regarding gender-appropriate behaviour are of course not confined to the trades.

In the Hopi culture of the American Southwest, pottery is a female province; but a male trade in India (Hays-Gilpin and Whitley, 1998: 139), while elsewhere it was a women’s trade. Trigger (1989: 223):

… in 1934, P. N. Tret’ yakov determined from fingerprints on the interiors of the vessels that the pottery associated with prehistoric hunter-fisher cultures of northern and central Russia was manufactured by women… Similar interpretations were not attempted by American archeologists prior to the 1960s and these studies were less archeological in that the identification of the sex of the potters depended entirely on the direct historical Approach.

Trades can also shift between genders for entirely pecuniary reasons. Davis-Kimball (pers. comm.) describes a situation in the American Southwest: “Maria, a SW American Indian, developed a black, incised highly-burnished pottery that became a much sought-after tourist (=$$) trade item. Women in her pueblo began making this pottery, then as the trade
became yet more lucrative, the men (for the first time) became engaged in pottery manufacturing. They may now control the business after Maria’s death.”

Thus the “everyday experience” of one culture may be upside down compared to another, and to cite the intuitively obvious in our own historic stream is merely to reinforce the normative behaviours bequeathed to us by Mediterranean civilization. The life of a plains nomad between the Caspian Sea and the Ural Mountains was simply not the same, nor can life in the cool forests of Northern Europe be expected to share commonality at all but a superficial level.

These are justifiable assumptions: what of evidence? Where the Celts are concerned, the physical evidence is frustratingly thin, and the documentary evidence is suspect. As Cunliffe (1997: 109-110) underlines, we have long had reason to believe that Caesar wrote a biased and incomplete account of Celtic life, and that the evidential weight from other sources combined suggests he downplayed the importance of women in Celtic culture by largely omitting them from his journal, and casting those he did refer to in a light abhorrent to the Roman public.

As an example of the kind of editorialising Caesar was inclined toward, Ross (1986: 115-116), in discussion of Druidism in Britain states: “Caesar does not mention them in his account of Britain… There is in fact only one actual reference to Druids in Britain by any Classical author.” Which of course was Tacitus, describing the Battle of Anglesey. If Caesar could comfortably ignore the powerful priesthood of the Celts in Britain, his simple minimalisation of the role of women in the “barbarian” culture becomes less surprising and more likely. There are references in the writings of Vopiscus to female Druids in Gaul (Ross, 1986: 116; James, 1993: 67; Koch and Carey, 1995: 28), perhaps the only non-Irish citation of the Ban-Drui role, and the impression the modern reader receives tends toward that of an otherwise deliberately incomplete record.
But this is our reading of the broader picture, revealing a gap in the documentation — it is an *absence* of evidence, not evidence in itself, and that is rarely a firm footing for deduction. As James (1993:66) commented:

The lives of women are underrepresented in the very male-oriented Classical sources, although archeology sheds considerable light on the female world, for example through offerings found in women’s graves. It is risky to make simple assumptions about gender roles.

The Vix tomb is the only truly outstanding example of a high-status female interment amongst the western Celts, though there are others (probably including the sex-indeterminate Stuttgart Bad-Cannstatt spear graves) of lesser opulence. Grave good suites include slate, bronze and iron artefacts (bangles, mirrors, spindle-whorls), and on a few rare occasions, daggers (Arnold, 1991). The evidence from the Steppes is far less literary (beyond Herodotus there is little), but the physical materials are spectacular, comprising a large collection of inhumations from the Black Sea to China, including many female weapon-graves and ample evidence of horsemanship associated with the interred women.

No matter how uncomfortable Western traditionalists may be with women occupying such roles, the evidence is largely indisputable, and for these cultures we may confidently draw an “everyday experience” whose gender relationships bare little resemblance to those of the Mediterranean states.

**New Synthesis: Conclusions**

At the beginning of this chapter, the question was posed, “is there room for a new synthesis providing a fresh framework for assignment of gender, or redefining gender stereotypes in ancient cultures?”

The answer is, almost certainly, yes. The proposal signifies the need for a revision of the underlying hypothesis on which prior assumptions were guided, namely that the
relationships of the sexes in terms of gender roles are fixed, that they were the same in all past cultures as those prevailing in modern times. Enough evidence has been gathered from both historic and archaeological sources, as outlined in the foregoing discussions, to refute this beyond reasonable doubt. A trend has emerged in the last decade amongst archaeologists working with gender mechanics as a contributory element of broader social theory to adopt such an outlook (Gilchrist, 1991: 498) but the process has yet to become universal, or to substantially challenge the long-established models guiding public perceptions of prehistoric or nonliterate societies.

Those models were established according to broad generalities during archeology’s materialist phase, the cultural-historical, or Normative era (Shafer, 1997: 10-15), when cultural norms were sought in analysis of materials. The persistence of ideas is perhaps nowhere more pronounced than the long-lived application of gender-role assumptions throughout the birth of the New Archeology and the progress of the Processual era. The new synthesis proposed is rooted in Post-Processual Contextual Archeology, in which variability in the ideological and abstract dimensions of human culture are necessary parts of the referential frame for analysis.

The revised hypothesis must state that gender roles are a variable quantity that can only be assigned to inhumed remains with all appropriate caveats satisfied; thus the value of ascription of physical sex based on gender-specific grave goods is seriously eroded, and cannot be considered an “absolute” technique even within the boundaries of its own calculated error factor.

The proposed methodology to address the revised hypothesis is deceptively straightforward.

1: Physical anthropologists or biological anthropologists now have more techniques available for sexing skeletal material than ever before. If even a few bones have survived,
enough sex-diagnostic characters are known to probably reach a decision at a low error factor (given a large enough sample group from the geographic population in general to provide a reliable reference range). Thus the techniques are more applicable today than at previous times, and the first step should be to automatically apply anthropometric or biochemical analysis, regardless of all other considerations. The specification of this step applies almost exclusively to the European excavation regimen, though perhaps also to older work elsewhere.

2: The established framework of grave good bimodality must be viewed as subordinate to anthropometric analysis. This resolves paradox when instances arise in which the gender-bias of traditional models is found to run counter to the osteological evidence, i.e., “paradox” is reduced to “an enhanced definition of normative practice for the period and culture in question.”

As an anthropological subscript to this, traits concerning even ten percent of a population are still common enough to be significant, and our modern outlook tends to embrace them as “normal, if less common.” Realistically, extinct cultures should be viewed the same way. This is the inverse of the traditional gender roles viewpoint — rather than holding that there is only one way of being human, thus all cultures must reflect the same model, we may recognise that there are many ways, and always have been — thus we should expect variability, from the subtle to the massive, and consciously accommodate its effects on the overall picture, not try to force all that we find into a narrow, if, to some, comfortable, single definition.

To clarify the term “deceptively” straightforward: at first glance it seems we need merely adjust our “hypothesis of the human condition” to make sense of the evidence, but to do so requires the reworking of considerable data to establish the reference ranges for geographic populations and thus the comparative tables to readily sex individuals, and with
the establishmental tendency to dispose of materials following their initial analysis, such revision is seriously disadvantaged. In the case of perhaps many early collections on which demography was first erected, revision may be impossible, and applicable only to discoveries from this point forward. This raises the question of how much of the total corpus of possible discoveries/data has already come to light, and what proportion may remain undisturbed, awaiting analysis by refined means. If insufficient new materials come to light to provide a significant sample group, a strongly-supportable revised demograph of extinct societies may never be possible, leaving us with merely the tantalising possibility that erroneous early scholarship has affected, perhaps forever, our view of, e.g., the European Iron Age.

Nevertheless, fresh surveys are ongoing and fresh discoveries are made. Application of such a revised hypothesis, whether in the proposed form or a related manner, has been adopted, if sporadically, such as the 1990s Viking and pre-Viking surveys of Iron Age Norway with particular reference to gender roles and power structures (Dommasne, 1992).

In the next chapter the influence of horsemanship on the gender constructs of past societies is considered. The societies in which the most significant degree of female equality seems to have developed were primary horse cultures, as opposed to secondary horse cultures in which females may have occupied statuses varying from second-class citizens to chattels. Examples of primary cultures are contrasted with secondary cultures, and exceptions to each case are described, as well as gender roles divorced completely from horsemanship. This chapter first summarises the origins of horsemanship in its various forms, then explores for a consequential or coincidental relationship between horsemanship and gender-egalitarian social norms.
Chapter Six:

Horsemanship

The Celts, Scythians, Sauro-Sarmatians and the Saka Confederacy provide examples of horse-using cultures extending from the western reaches of Europe to western China. All of these cultures were of Indo-European descent, Caucasoid stock, had a taste for luxury, practiced shamanic religion and spoke derivative languages — these are baseline similarities amongst otherwise disparate peoples. A migration is in evidence, east to west, moving out of the east, with considerable cultural activity in the Eurasian steppes. This is probably the geographic arena in which the horse was first domesticated, so is there a consequential relationship between horsemanship and gender-equality? Some intimate connection and characterizing force upon those cultures for whom horsemanship became their greatest asset? Or is it coincidental, due to the evolution of these cultures in comparative isolation, with the exception of the Scyths, from the powerful patriarchies that existed elsewhere?

Origins of Horsemanship

When and where the horse was first domesticated is at present unknown. The earliest inferences are linguistic and point to the horse being domesticated during Proto-Indo-European times. Mallory (1989 : 119) lists “the impressive series of correspondences” in which the phonetically related ancient words for horse are found throughout daughter languages. “As all of these words regularly indicate a domestic horse, linguists are generally agreed that the Proto-Indo-European horse was also domesticated. It is not only widely attested in the Indo-European languages but it is about the only animal name to figure prominently in … personal names. [W]e … emphasise the degree to which the horse is embedded in the culture of the early Indo-Europeans.”
Amongst the earliest traces of equine-human interaction observed from physical evidence are the accumulations of horse bones from the Sredni Stog (IIa) site at Derievka, Ukraine, supporting exploitation, hunting and perhaps actual domestication (Levine, 1990). Amongst these materials, a single striated tooth was noted (Anthony and Brown, 1991: Taylor, et all, 1991)) and identified with some justification as the product of a rope bit. These deposits are around 6000 years old, contemporary with the closely-related early “Kurgan” (Battleaxe/Pit Grave/Yamnaya) culture (Telegin, 2002). In the same region are found carved antler artefacts tentatively identified as the cheek pieces of bridles, and which function adequately in this role in practical trials (Telegin’s work, cited in Anthony and Brown, 1991 : 23; discussed in detail in Dietz, 2003). Similar artifacts are also known from Germany, the “Ostorf type,” but their function remains doubtful, and may in fact be fishing equipment (Dietz, 2003 : 194). Indeed, bit-wear analysis has been broadly challenged (Levine, 1999 : 11-12). However, the “Derievka stallion”, a ‘hoof and head’ votive deposit excavated by Telegin in 1964 and originally dated to around 5500 BC, was eventually radiocarbon dated with certainty to around the 2nd c BC, in the Scythian Iron Age — an intrusive burial in an Eneolithic site nearly 4000 years older. Levine (1999 : 15) raises doubt as to the votive nature of the deposit.

However, tooth striation as an indicator of bitting, therefore domestication for riding, is a compelling tool, and bitted horses were tentatively identified from Botai, Kazakhstan, dated 3500-3000 BC, (Anthony and Brown, 2000; 2002 : 63; Dietz, 2002 : 195), supporting the contention that domestication and use of the horse was early, widespread and more or less efficient. Olsen (2002 : 101) discusses the Botai excavations in detail, and maintaining a more cautious position, does not discount the possibility that horses were ridden before 3000 BC. Dietz (2002) makes a thorough analysis of all claimed Eneolithic bridle equipment, including bitted and bitless designs, and while there are few certainties it seems all possible
configurations for such bridles were overcomplex and/or inefficient, suggesting a process of refinement that produced the “simple” bridle by the early Bronze Age. The bitless bridle is likely to have been used in the first instance as it is mechanically simpler and involves far less complicated training and communication between horse and rider. Anthony and Brown (2002: 55) are more certain of horse riding in the Eneolithic.

Discounting the apparent “crib-biting” marks found on fence posts from Russia and dated at around 18000 BC, indicating corralled horses during the interglacial (Adams, pers. comm), other tangible indicators of horse domestication fall much later, and include artworks, e.g., carved bone plaques in the shape of horses from Eneolithic sites on the steppes, the earliest documentary references in the cuneiform texts of the ~2100 BC Ur III period (Oates 2003: 117) or the comparatively recent illustration of a mounted Egyptian warrior amongst the tomb decorations of Horemheb, ca 1300 BC (Baker, 1985).

The domestication of the horse likely happened not once but several times, and in several places (e.g., Scythians “rediscovered” riding before 900 BC, in the very lands where the Battleaxe people and the Sredni Stog culture had probably been riding 3000 years earlier (Mallory, 1989: 199)). Different cultures moved at different speeds, and used horses for different purposes, but the grasslands of the Ukraine have been central to the issue for thousands of years. The Steppes were the natural environment of the wild horse, the “sea of grass” that stretches from the Black Sea to China north of the Himalayas and south of the taiga forests that skirt the subarctic. The horse evolved in the Old World and seems to have reached its current morphological expression as a response to a grass-fed life on these cool-temperate plains.

We may safely speculate that horses were first used for load-bearing, beasts of burden accompanying pastoralists afoot. This may have been the situation for thousands of years, but where and when a horse was first hitched to a vehicle, even one as simple as a travois, let
alone the earliest instance of a human being mounting a horse, are events it is unwise to place even general dates upon. The archaeological record provides earliest dated examples, and these offer useful guides.

The Indo-European word for horse, *ek’uo*, from which the Latin *equus* obviously devolves, is found in lingual streams dating as early as 6000 BC (Hamp, 1990; Kuzmina, 2003: 203) which suggests common familiarity with horses, if not their domestication, during the Neolithic. As with all Indo-European studies, this is inference, albeit logical. Eneolithic sites in Russia yield considerable horse bones and suggest cultic practice as early 5000 BC (Anthony and Brown, 2000: 81), so in its common definition (as opposed to the zoological, see Renfrew, 2002: 4) the horse was comfortably domesticated by this point.

Other animals were extensively exploited for both draught and riding and it is important to make an accurate identification and association. Donkey, ass, mule, ox and onager have all been used, and while early Assyrians used onager to draw primitive chariots, they were replaced by the more capable horse in due course. Amongst Assyrian seal-impression depictions of ridden equids from the late 3rd millennium BC, none can be identified specifically as horses (Oates, 2003: 120). Oxen for draught are, by comparison, well-adapted, and are used to the present day for this purpose. Distinguishing which species is being used for which purpose in the archaeological context is thus crucial.

**Load-Bearing**

We may never know when the first packhorses appeared. Domestication for load-bearing may have been as early as the Neolithic, and may have occurred independently in many times and places. There are no artworks or tangible remains yet known to indicate where and when it might have first appeared. Analysis of limb bones and other aspects of physiology will provide valuable data, as load-bearing induces pathological markers (joint physiology, bone
density etc.) distinct from those found in wild horses, or domesticated horses put to other tasks (Dietz, 2002: 197). Levine (1999: 53) reports abnormalities of the thoracic vertebrae connected with riding, and this exploration is continuing.

This work is extensive and complicated, but may help to establish a practical baseline for functional domestication of the horse, and its associated implications for the development of human societies. Such studies have shed valuable light on the Derievka materials, for instance, in which separate studies by Levine and Benecke in the late 1990s indicated the horse population to be essentially of the wild type, thus on this basis they were primarily domesticated as a food source (Rassamakin, 2002: 49). By 2003 Levine doubted domestication at all, as the population structures more closely matched those of a hunted, as opposed to a herded, species (Levine, 2003: 2).

Draught

The only archaeological evidence for the invention of the travois is the ruts such a device leaves behind the draft animal, and preservation of such ichnostructures is rare, e.g., the unique Bronze Age ruts considered the product of a slide-car vehicle found on the islands of Malta and Gozo (Piggott, 1983: 38), with which we may compare the much-younger wagon-ruts amongst the tombs at Regolini Galassi (Von Vacano, 1960). Also, unless identifiable hoofprints are also preserved, the species put to draught remains unidentifiable in the context.

The invention of the wheel seems to have fallen in the first centuries of the 4th millennium BC, and evidence for the existence of wheeled transport is found more or less contemporaneously in Iraq (wagon pictograms associated with the Uruk-Eanna IVa level (Piggott, 1992: 18) and Europe (wheel-ruts near long-barrows associated with the Funnell-Beaker culture at Flintbek, Germany, plus near-contemporary pictograms from
Bronocice, Poland) (Mallory, 1989 : 163; Bakker, et. al., 1999). Shortly after this (an early possible date of 3500 BC has been offered), clay models of wheels appear in the remains of the Tripolye Culture at Velika Slobidka, on the Dnestr River, in the north-eastern Black Sea area (Rassamakin, 2002 : 50-51). Whether the first draught animals were horses is extremely doubtful. Early evidence, e.g., model carts and cast bronze animals (Piggott, 1983 : 17) indicate oxen were used for traction in the 3rd millennium BC, however the horse was domesticated (in some practical sense) in the Pontic region long before this and the adoption of horses for traction could not have been a long-delayed process unless horses had already obtained a warrior-or ruler-prestige status which socially elevated them above the mundane role of draught in those cultures which used them at all. Also, Mallory (1989 : 199) points out that the domesticated horses at Derievka were probably too small to draw the cumbersome wagons of the Eneolithic and were thus, perhaps counter-intuitively, given the early date, purely for riding (or, more likely, consumption). The Yamnaya had wheeled transport (certainly for ritual use), but were not the first on the steppes to do so (Rassamakin, 2002 : 55).

Charioteering

The earliest known two-wheeled, horse drawn vehicle likely existed before the end of the 4th millennium BC. A mere two-wheeled vehicle is not a chariot, though. Bakker et. al. (1999) comments: “Already before the end of the 4th millennium BC two-wheelers could have appeared. This is shown by bovid-drawn carts among the carvings pecked upon the inside of side-slabs of the gallery grave at Lohne-Engelshecke … Germany.”

Piggott reviewed the evolution of horse- or ox-drawn vehicles in The Earliest Wheeled Transport, from the Atlantic Coast to the Caspian Sea (1983) and examined the role of the horse as a human resource in the process. The Andronovo culture of Bronze
The chariot is the most tangible symbol of Iron Age wealth, a status symbol best-known from La Tene-era inhumations. This example was built in the late 1980s under the guidance of Andres Furger-Gunti, of the Swiss National Museum, Zurich. All available archaeological sources were used in development of the 2nd c BC vehicle, and it functioned fully as expected.

Age Ukraine has yielded a ‘chariot burial’ dated 1900-2000 BC (Anthony and Brown, 2000: 84). An early vehicle we might term a chariot, and which was again specifically horse-drawn, was described by Stuart Piggott (1974) on the basis of materials from barrow-graves in the Caucasus Mountains, and while the vehicles do not closely resemble the chariots of even slightly later times (e.g., Egyptian chariots of the New Kingdom, or Greek chariots of Mycenaean times), they can be crudely classified with them.

A date of 1480 BC was established by radiocarbon method for the older of these finds. The vehicle was a two-horse design with a functional G-pole, attached to a two-wheeled body of timber. Peculiarly, rather than a riding platform, the body carried a broad, longitudinally narrow box, in which passengers may have crouched for balance — or goods may have been loaded, suggesting it was a light cart, not a chariot.

The Hyksos introduced a “chariot” of sorts to Egypt during the Second Intermediate Period (Gutgesell, 1998), around the 17th c BC (~15th Dynasty), a heavy, slow, four-man design which the Egyptians soon adapted, recognizing its value if properly designed and used. Monuments of the 18th Dynasty (New Kingdom) display representational art (Longrigg, 1972: 9) and depictions are known amongst the Assyrians of similar vintage. Indeed, the Assyrians were purely a charioteering nation until learning the skill of riding from their enemies the Medes early in the 7th c BC (Hicks, 1975: 14). Horse drawn vehicles are known from Europe and the Steppes (ox-cart burials are known from the Yamnaya Culture, c. 4000 BC (Bakker et. al., 1999)) though if grave goods are an indicator the chariot did not supplant the wagon as a status vehicle (the sports car of the ancient world?) until the Iron Age was well established: vehicles are characteristic in Celtic high-status burials, the body of the wagon being the funerary bier, the wheels removed and placed within the grave chamber, and four wheels are found in graves dated earlier than the beginning of the 5th c
BC. Though the steppe cultures were expressly riders, chariots were not unknown to them, and symbolic vehicular burials are known from the early Iron Age, e.g., the Pazyryk tombs.

Contemporaneous with the Hyksos in Egypt, the Andronovo culture-group occupied the steppes from the Caspian Sea to the Altai Mountains, and from the Amu Darya in the south to the Irtysh in the north. This Steppe Bronze Age amalgam was no stranger to the horse. Mallory (1989: 228) says: “The horse was clearly domesticated (it accounts for from 12 to 27 percent of the domestic fauna), and was employed both in traction as well as being ridden: horse psalia, designed to hold the bit in the horse’s mouth, are found on Andronovo sites, and paired horse burials suggest its use in drawing vehicles.” This includes chariots, as unearthed at Sintashta, east of the Ural Mountains, though in this case the pair of spoked wheels are suggested only by impressions in soil, and this offers no indication as to how functional the vehicle may have been (Davis-Kimball, pers. comm.). The Sintashta chariot was radiocarbon dated by Western workers and returned an average date of 2026 BC, which may indeed prove the world’s oldest chariot (Davis-Kimball, footnote to Petrenko, 1995: 22). “Chariots” of the Sintashta culture are also known from some six other funerary localities, and while useful information is thin, the existence of two-wheeled transport in this culture is highly probable, especially as paired horses are found in the same burials in the Ural region (Kuzmina, 2003: 222).

Charioteering had evolved in Greece in Mycenaean times, Sanders (1978: 68) refers to a surviving 13th c BC Hittite letter describing the doings of the ‘Ahhiyawa,’ their name for the Acheans of Homer, and chariotry is expressly mentioned. The contemporaneous ‘Boar Hunt Frescoe’ from the palace at Tyrins is especially significant as it shows not only a quite conventional two-wheeled vehicle with a two-horse hitch but that the driver and companion are unmistakably women, despite their male-style plain chiton dress. Given the limited status of women in even Mycenaean times (Davies, 1984: 312-313) this frescoe is remarkable,
representing either a portrait of actual, perhaps privileged, women, or an iconoclastic ideal commissioned and displayed by a man willing to defy the letter of his society.

It would seem horsemanship was a suite of skills that suffered badly in the post-Mycenaean ‘dark age.’ The Greeks were ‘secondary horsemen’ in the current definition, and allowed the skills to be lost so that they were relearned in the middle centuries of the First Millennium BC. In Mycenaean times the horse was at least as important to the Greek city states as ever it was to Egypt. Sandars (1978 : 69-72) says:

Mycenae … dominates a plain like the castles of the German robber barons in the Odenwald and Black Forest which looks down on the Rhine valley. The plain ensured grazing for horses, though this may well have been a source of friction. For Mycenae had a great many neighbours … and … there was never very much elbow-room in the Argolid. The horse is an economic liability, and the pressure on the limited areas of productive land must at times have been extreme.

There is no reason to think that the Mycenaens drank mare’s milk or ate horseflesh [allusion to Scythian practice]. The horse was a weapon and a symbol. The chariot and mystique of horse-owning, and the status of charioteer, were quite as important here as in the Near East to judge by the paintings, seals and documents… It is very rare in the wall-paintings and on painted pots for a Mycenaean chariot actually to be engaged in combat, or to be moving at more than a sedate walk; more often it is quite stationary. If its importance was greater as a symbol than as a weapon, it did nonetheless play its part in the decline of the Mycenaean economy.

**Riding — and its Implications for Culture**

The earliest characteristically mounted culture of which we know are the Yamnaya (Kurgan/Battleaxe) people, who rose in the Ukraine around 4000 BC and expanded through Lower Danubia by 3500 BC, supplanting and subjugating the extant post-neolithic farming culture (Gimbutas, 1970; Mallory, 1989) There can be little doubt that mounted mobility was a primary tactic for these early conquerors, as was their skill in bronzeworking, and many fundamental traits of our own culture can be seen in the social habits they brought with them into Europe, including tumulus burial, proliferation of weapons, and pastoralism as opposed to agriculture. Of chief interest here, their patriarchal social and religious systems, oversetting by mainforce the *subjectively* matriarchal system of “Old Europe” (Gimbutas’
term), would seem to have been passed down throughout all succeeding ages in some parts of Europe, and the continuing influence of its precepts, transmitted to us directly or indirectly, via the Mediterranean powers, embodies the analytical focus of this study.

Gimbutas’ work has, like any controversial proposition, been challenged, though less, it should be noted for her Early Bronze Age culture-movement theories than for her feminist content (e.g., Georgoudi, 1992; Conkey and Tringham, 1995; Meskell, 1995; and Hutton, 1997.) Renfrew (1987) challenged her time-depth for language-spread via nomadic demography, but her overall “Kurgan Hypothesis” has recently received fresh support from the area of human genetics (Jones, 2002: 293-297). In addition, her general model of waves of invasion at the base of the Bronze Age has been further supported by a strict analytical approach to the materials of the Cucuteni-Tripolye culture located in western Ukraine, Danubia and the Carpathian region. Dergachev assessed the total numbers, timedepth and spatial range of “monuments, fortified settlements, their typonomy, and arrowheads,” (Dergachev, 2002: 107) in this area and finds distinct evidence of military crisis, followed by changes in material culture, synchronized well with the projected “Kurgan-culture” movements. “Old Europe” may not have survived the coming of the Steppe pastoralists, but they did not go down without a fight.

Anthony and Brown (1991: 23) said:

Methods of control other than bits might have been used prehistorically, importantly dropped nose-bands; as those would leave no physical evidence, their use cannot be investigated archaeologically. The absence of bit-wear [on teeth], therefore, does not necessarily imply the absence of riding. However, at 4000 BC, centuries before the invention of the wheel, a bitted horse could only have been a mount.

Debate continues over identification of bitting in materials of this early date, with an interesting distinction arising between riding for military or civilian purposes. Renfrew (2002: 5-6) considers it highly likely the Derievka horses were herded and therefore almost certainly ridden as well, but asks why there seems no evidence of riding in warfare amongst
these peoples. In military terms, the indicators seem to be that horses were used for draft before riding, though these events fall long after the “Kurgan” expansion into Danubia. **Were** the “Kurgan” people mounted? Given the horse remains in their tombs along with those of other domesticates, their warlike nature and what appear to be horse bits amongst gravegoods, the answer is more than likely *yes*. Add to this the appearance amongst Cucuteni-Tripolye peoples of horse-headed sceptres which “undoubtedly came from the steppe zone, since they symbolize a bridled saddle-horse” (Dergachev, 2002 : 108) and the point is supported. (These ‘maces’ however are debatable as markers for domesticates, Levine (2003 : 4) makes the cogent point that the Tien Shan snow leopard is hardly to be assumed domesticated merely because it appears in the art of the Altai.) The Yamnaya culture also had wheeled transport, so perhaps the draft-then-riding model holds good in any case. The absence of military riding at Derievka and, in Central Asia, at Botai, Renfrew sees as a sociocultural phenomenon, that these societies were not especially warlike. He supports this with the absence of metal horse harness from the period, despite excellent bronzeworking being available to the cultures.

The horse emerged in warfare amongst the Assyrians as a nobleman’s mount, in which a slave or other menial lead the horse, and the “rider” merely used the elevation the horse’s back offered as an archery platform. This is far from horsemanship as it was understood in both earlier and later centuries. Meanwhile, in Egypt the horse had been adopted for all forms of use by 1600 BC at least. Taylor (1994 : 377) speculates that a “mobile military elite” had come into existence on the Steppes as early as 1700 BC, indicated by the scattered rich warrior burials known as the “Seima-Turbino phenomenon,” predating and presaging in many ways the mounted and chariotbearing Andronovo culture.

The profound importance of the horse to the Steppe peoples might be judged from its cultic significance. Horse sacrifice and feasting accompanied elaborate burial ceremonies
across wide temporal and spatial localities and common shamanic themes repeat in cultic artworks as widespread as the Tamgaly Petroglyphs, the detail of the Issyk Priestess’s headdress and the fabulous horse trappings from the Pazyryk tombs. Similarly, the ‘head and hoof’ burials suggest an animal ritually slaughtered and consumed, with the head, neck and forelimbs, still conjoined by skin, buried in a votive context (the aforementioned ‘Derievka stallion,’ for instance, though a horse’s head wrapped in its skin was sometimes buried in human graves, e.g., northeastern Kazakhstan of the 7th-6th c BC, Yablonsky 1995b : 201).

The most overwhelming horse sacrifice yet known is that of a ‘Tzar’ tumulus, Ul’skaya Kurgan 1 in the Kuban region (Petrenko, 1995 : 10), a 15-meter high mound belonging to the Early Scythian Period (6th to early 5th c BC), whose enormous burial chamber contained the slaughtered remains of over 360 horses, the bodies arranged in orderly ranks and circles representative of the tethering posts of a military camp: we may surmise that in this instance the deceased ruler figuratively took an entire army to the afterlife with him, though such excess is also a statement of wealth in the extant world, as the horses were likely tribute from client tribes. More horses and oxen flanked the main burial, and the chamber also contained the remains of a vast funerary feast in which fifty more horses can be recognised, plus oxen and ram. On a smaller scale, horse burial is common amongst the Scythians of the period and region.

It is reasonable to see this as the continuity of an ancient tradition which accompanied the Scythian peoples in their migration from the east. The only directly comparable burial to Ul’skaya I is that of Arzhan in the Uyukskaya highlands of Tuva, southern Siberia, excavated 1971-1974 and dated to the Arzhanskii Period of the Tuvinian Culture, 8th-7th c BC (Bokovenko, 1995 : 259-260). This 120m-diameter stone-lined structure contained some 160 horses. Yablonski (1995c : 249) said: “Saka kurgans usually contain either buried horses or parts of the animal. Connected with the horse cult are harness items which traditionally
constitute one of the characteristic triad of the Saka tomb accoutrements.” Relative to this, Bokovenko (1995b : 265) observed: “The appearance of this cultic feature indicates the formation of a social strata of mounted warriors within society.”

Horse sacrifice is known from the far west also, horse bones have been found associated with post-feasting or otherwise votive assemblages in the British Isles (see p70), e.g., the horse from the assemblage in the votive well at Droitwich Bays Meadow, Worcestershire (Ross, 1986 : 106), or “Cunliffe’s discovery of the heads and legs of horses in various contexts at Danebury, Hampshire ... suggestive of the ‘heads and hooves’ ritual where the body of the animal was consumed and the hide used to wrap the seer in preparation for his mantic sleep” (Ross, 1995 : 439).

Yablonsky (1995a : 195) cites the appearance of horse tack in the eastern steppe regions as lying between the 14th and 11th centuries BC, along with the consolidation of a cattle-breeding economy right across Eurasia. At some point after 1000 BC horsemanship returned to widespread use on the North Caucasus and Pontic Steppes, this time to stay: in one of the most remarkable of all social evolutions this event lead to the establishment of the archetypal nomadic steppe culture that has persisted essentially unchanged to recent times. The mounted warrior ruled the temperate plains of Eurasia for thousands of years, and entered the mythology and folklore of nations far away as the migrations of the “hordes” brought these highly mobile and “alien” peoples into contact with sedentary “civilized” cultures elsewhere.

In riding the use of the horse found its ultimate expression. The horseman’s mobility and the arrogance that comes perhaps from looking down on the world (what Plato called “horse-pride” on the one occasion he ever mounted (Trippett, 1975 : 56) characterised the peoples for whom it became the norm. It was never the norm for the Greeks, who were slow to recognise its value. “Homer speaks of riding as a gymnastic display of no practical value,”
The Celts of Europe are written of by the Romans as fiercely proud warriors for whom the horse, either ridden or to draw chariots, had become their lifeblood. Horsemen by the thousands flocked to the banners of the chiefs when war beckoned, and their actions against the Greeks (Delphi, 279 BC), the tribes of Anatolia (in the establishment of Galatia, 278 BC), the Romans in the Po Valley, Gaul and later Britain, are a record of the use of cavalry independently of foot troops, and in compliment to them. These peoples had been horsemen/horsewomen for a very long time: the earliest appearance of bronze bridle fittings in Europe lies in latest Urnfield times, ca 8th century BC (Thompson, 1996 : 44; Cunliffe, 1997 : 44).

Of the Celts, Strabo says: “Indeed, all of them are fighters by nature, but they are stronger as cavalry than as foot-soldiers, and among the Romans the best cavalry-force comes from them.” These were Roman tactics: recruit the enemy. We may compare this to the Sarmatian legion, a force recruited to the Roman army on the steppes but which served in Britain (Davis-Kimball, 2002 : 32).

Similar descriptions ( Usually in Greek, though some in Assyrian) fit the Scythians, and we can easily apply them to the other materially and culturally comparable peoples found across the steppes to China, supporting the weight of archeological materials now available. The horse has been bred and used in the Middle East for thousands of years, likewise in India and China, and in the AD 1600s the horses that escaped from the Spaniards were adopted by the Native Americans, rapidly emerging as signatory of the entire nomadic and warlike Plains Indians culture. The temptation is overwhelming to directly compare this social phenomenon to the rapid and irreversible overturn in steppe-pastoralist culture that came about with the discovery of what horsemanship meant to the self-determination and power of the people who held the skills. Anthony and Brown (2002 : 65-66) compare the sociocultural events
surrounding the advent of Native American horsemanship to those that can be traced in the archaeological record of the Late Eneolithic on the steppes, a compelling observation that suggests the origins of horsemanship may indeed be found there.

Horse-using nations were powerful. The horse, as much as the sword, has been a symbol of nationalism, independence, and the military strength it takes to obtain them. Thus the horse is a tool of power (and obviously status), and it follows that the powerful will restrict access to the horse to preserve their monopoly. The parallel between national power and gender role stereotypes comes into focus here, as the mobility and range of a mounted woman is identical to that of a mounted man.

Horse tack is found in many Sauro-Sarmatian female warrior graves. Though the status of women in the Altai is as yet less-clear than amongst other Saka tribes, the Altai peoples were not above dealing with the high-status women of their neighbours for the warrior’s most valuable asset — his horse.

Stirrups are first historically recorded in the writings of a Chinese officer, dated AD 477, and describing the horse tack of the Mongolian or Hunnish tribes (Hartley Edwards, 1985 : 198; Hartley Edwards also credits the Sarmatians with the invention of the saddle as we know it; Bokovenko 1995c : 289 cites “leather saddles with light wooden frames” appearing in the Altaian Pazyryk Stage; see Levine (1999 : 51-53) for analysis of ancient saddle forms). An artefact, found in one of the Pazyryk graves by Sergie Rudenko, was interpreted to be a stirrup made of cloth (Davis-Kimball, pers. comm.) — over eight centuries earlier than the first record. This ties in with the Kul-Oba Torc (discovered in 1830, and which illustrates, on the details of its buffer terminals, riders whose feet are through loops of some sort) and the Chertomlyk amphora (found 1862) whose bas relief shows a Scythian pony tethered in full tack, including what may be interpreted as a simple loop-type stirrup depending from the saddle (Plate #9, p164), to suggest Steppe cultures invented it much earlier than is generally thought. If stirrups were traditionally made of cloth they are
PLATE #9 DETAIL FROM THE CHERTOMLYK AMPHORA

Discovered in 1862, this remarkable 4th c BC bronze amphora, of Greek manufacture, a luxury item for a Scythian chieftain, provides one of our most important glimpses of Scythian life in the realistic friezework around its top. Amongst scenes of everyday life for horse-nomads, we see here a mount in full tack hobbled to graze, and hanging from the saddle is what may, in light of detail on the Kul-Oba torc and Rudenko’s discoveries at Pazyryk, be interpreted as a stirrup, perhaps made of leather or cloth — non-durable as archaeological materials, and therefore absent from the general record.

unlikely to have been particularly durable as archaeological materials, and may be amongst those artefacts to disappear totally under normal conditions, the superb preservation due to permafrost in the Altai alone offering us a clue to their possible existence. Piggott (1992: 89) refers to rope-loop and metal-hook embryonic stirrups appearing in the last centuries BC in India as well as in “Scythian and Kushan contexts.”

The implications are uncomplicated: that smaller individuals can more easily mount bigger horses, and amongst the mostly Przewalski-descended horse mummies from Pazyryk are found a number (one or more in each kurgan) of Ferghana horses, 15 hands or more in height (Talbot-Rice, 1957: 71). We may compare this with the mental image of the reputedly very tall Gaulish warriors (of either sex) leaping astride tarpan ponies. Was it easier for shorter male or female warriors of the steppes (considerable variety in stature is found) to mount bigger, better warhorses with the use of a simple loop of cloth? This seems self-evident, but especially in the case of horsewomen, who were foremost in the geo-cultural region that seems to have given rise to the stirrup. Given that the mounted elite tended to be physically impressive specimens throughout the steppe world (Rolle, 1989: 56) was the stirrup a female invention? This is an intriguing speculation which, in the absence of documentary evidence, may never be answered.

What would the Scythian be without the horse? Or the Plains Indian? Or the Celt, or the Sarmatian, the Saka, or the Parthian? Amongst Sarmatian inhumations at Pokrovka, “some skeletons have their legs placed in “horseback riding” position, but articulated at the joints. Perhaps this is to indicate they rode to the next world horseback.” (Davis-Kimball, pers. comm.) If this speculation has substance, it would indicate a culture for whom the horse had become everything: horsemanship is an intimately-connected characterising force upon those cultures for whom it became their greatest resource. Mounted mobility fostered nomadism as a lifestyle, and the nomad pastoralist cultures of the Steppes have continued in
an unbroken continuity for almost three thousand years. Though the 20th century had significant impacts on traditional lifestyles and values, it did not entirely dissipate cultures based on the horse, and studies presented at the October 2000 conference, hosted by Carnegie Museum, on horse-human interactions touched on pastoralist cultures in the ex-Soviet republics, revealing a stressed but surviving society (Olsen, pers. comm.).

Mounted mobility, it is here postulated, fostered more than the nomadism in which cultures were able to exploit fixed resources in a variety of locations over time. It fostered the independence of one sex from the other, in cultures whose preexisting customary machinery either a) allowed it to happen, or b) were unable to prevent it. To illustrate, the Persians of the Achaemenid period (mid-6th c to mid-4th c BC) were a horse-using culture but within their domain women occupied comparatively low social strata (e.g., they could work, even in manual trades such as metalsmithing, and receive fair pay, but not be seen in public to collect it (Hicks, 1975 : 66). (This may be contrasted with depictions of Persian women in the textiles of the contemporaneous Pazyryk culture and elsewhere.) The dynamics of the society prevented women’s access to horsemanship, therefore no arena existed in which women could exert independence through this means. But in the less-materially rich, non-sedentary cultures far to the north, where lifeways followed the herds that grazed on seasonally-shifting vegetation, and where women did and still do a large part of the physical day to day work of the community, at some point a woman mounted a horse’s back and discovered she could ride as far and as fast as any man.

The wording of the above presupposes a gender-ranked hierarchy preexisted, and that social unrest would accompany such a revelation. While this may have been the case, it may just as easily have been no revelation at all, as women became riders to tend herds of sheep and goats roaming the steppes in sparser summer pasturage far from camp, merely as an extension of their normal chores. Such functional arguments tend to be strong, as they are so
readily understood. Rolle (1989: 86-87) suggested horse breeding was a woman’s task, and that riding followed naturally from this. This would assume there was no driving force for men to maintain absolute control of horses for themselves as a military and social advantage; or that prior to the society learning the skill of riding a dual-gendered warrior class already existed; or that gender-based hierarchy amongst at least some steppe tribes in extreme antiquity was far less pronounced than our customary stereotypes might imagine. To this day in Central Asia, both boys and girls become familiar with the horse’s back riding with a parent as soon as they can sit up, and the milking of mares and making of koumiss, the ceremonial fermented milk drink, are women’s tasks. There are many possibilities, and the latter two cases decouple horsemanship from gender-equality. Yet can any one explanation — other than a consequential link between horsemanship and gender equality — cover all the societies over many centuries in which female mounted warriors existed?

This writer contends the answer is no. Consider the other horse-using cultures in which women occupied a low status. Roman women were traditionally (if not colloquially) demure and custom-bound (Warde Fowler, 1908), and this was almost certainly a descendant trait from the Greeks who, between the 7th and 4th centuries BC progressively stripped social freedoms from women. Neither of these cultures particularly took to the horse, cavalry was only ever a secondary military resource (evidenced by the writings of e.g., Xenophon and Caesar), and riding was never a common civilian passion for them such as we are familiar with in our own immediate history. This is possibly because the crowded cities of their domains fostered a pedestrian lifestyle and their societies gave rise to both a ponderously massive slave stratum and a poverty level that meant horses were accessible only to the free and wealthy (Roberts, 1984: 67). True, only free, wealthy Celts could afford horses or elevate themselves into the warrior class, but the poverty line would have been determined differently, and the aspiration seems to have been omnipresent. The two preeminent
Mediterranean powers, and all their dependent colonies and territories, spanning a thousand years of ascendency, and whose mores form the basis of our own society, are thus removed from this question at a single stroke.

And what of European cultures postdating the Roman epoch? They too are characterised by politics, customs, mores and religious assumptions that all had their roots in Ancient Rome and the Greek world. The Arab peoples have been intimately associated with horsemanship since Pharaonic times, but from antiquity they too maintained women at a low social position. With the rise of Islam post-AD 700, a new characterizing force appeared in the Eastern Mediterranean and spread rapidly, taking with it both female subjugation and horsemanship skills. Before AD 1000 it had invaded the steppes east of the Caspian Sea in the form of the sprawling Kwarazmian Empire (Bosworth, 1968), long a part of the Seljuk Turkish Empire and descended from steppe cattle-breeders of the Syr Darya and Amu Darya deltas (Yablonsky 1995a : 196). Bosworth (1968 :191-195) describes the independent Kwarasm under Emperor Mohammed II, who came to power in AD 1200, just prior to the Mongol mobilisation. Perhaps ironically, Kwarasm, after declaring war on the Khan who had sought a trade treaty with them, (Trippett, 1975 : 138), was the first great victim of Temujin’s westward campaign that saw the free-ranging horse-archer return to haunt a Europe ravaged by similar hordes over 800 years earlier. Phillips (1969 : 57-63) describes these campaigns in detail. Why ironically? While Ghengis Khan sent only men into frontal assault, he mobilized the entire Mongol nation under his banner: women served primarily as defensive troops, but serve they did, with horse, sword, bow and mailed armour. This is directly comparable to some Greek and Roman records that indicate Celtic tribes mobilised in their entirety for war (Thompson, 1996 : 58), the difference being that able-bodied Celtic women would, it now seems likely, form part of the primary warrior cadre.

An important footnote to the Mongol mobilisation of women concerns the reporting
of this information in modern sources. Trippett (1975) is the only source which mentions this, despite every other salient point from the same passages being raised in earlier, later and more scholarly works. Chambers (1979: 51-67) describes the Mongol army in minute detail but ignores the role of women completely, while Morgan (1986: 40) goes so far as to admit; “Women played an important role, not only at times in political affairs, but also on occasion in warfare…” His book devoted one paragraph to Mongol women. The fairest, though still brief, description of Mongol women is found in Spuler (1972: 80), a translation of the writings of European travelers in the Far East:

The girls and women gallop their horses just as skillfully as the men. We also saw them carrying bows and quivers. Both men and women can stay in the saddle for a long time… All work rests on the shoulders of the women; they make fur coats, clothes, shoes, bootlegs, and everything else made from leather. They also drive the carts and mend them, load the camels and are very quick and efficient in all their work. All women wear trousers and some of them shoot with the bow as accurately as the men.

This is as close to the military mobilisation of women as any of these modern commentarists was prepared to come, and only Morgan cared to mention that the widow of Ghengis Khan was regent of the empire, with full access to power, for a considerable period. Davis-Kimball (2002: 220-229) provides a detailed account of this period of history. The selectivity of reporting in the earlier works is hardly ambiguous, while the passage above clearly describes women who already possess the cardinal skills — archery and horsemanship — required for military service.

Horsemanship has been a skill since ancient times in India, but both Hindu and Muslim regimes have maintained traditional prohibitions against women. This is another arena in which the horse was a military tool controlled by the ruling patriarchies: China, from pre- and post-Imperial times also reflected this pattern, and in feudal Japan the horse became a Samurai resource after its introduction. However, patriarchal as the bushido system was, a female Samurai tradition did indeed exist, from as much as a thousand years ago. The classic
epic the *Heike Monogatari* features historic figures such as Tomoe Gozen and Yamabuki at the time of the Heike-Genji war of AD1094. Though the female Samurai tradition faded with the passage of time and the social politics of Japan, it never disappeared completely, and the weapon-style of Naginata-Do remains a prominent female martial art (Coyle, 2001).

In every case we see the same pattern, but Egypt, Persia, Babylon, India, China, and the societies descending out of Greece and Rome, and the Muslim world, have one overwhelming commonality: they were all the products of old empires, with ingrained patterns of thought and expectations of normative behavior. They were the ones who, largely, acculturated other nations, not vice versa, thus we see the spread and reinforcing of their norms through space and time. But the peoples in the swathe from northern Europe to the ranges on the north aside of the Himalayas had existed in comparative isolation, migrated at the speed of foot transport, and whose lifeways were governed in large part by the severity of their environment. The domestication of the horse clearly had enormous social impact, and constitutes the most significant dimension in their existence. They were primary horse-using cultures, while all the others were secondaries: the horse did not shape those other societies, but was merely absorbed into them. The question now becomes, how far-reaching was this “alternate” social structure embodied by the nonliterate peoples of Eurasia, and does Western traditionalism hamper our ability to detect it in the historical and archaeological evidence?

To explore this point, let us consider a sampling of other cultures, both within and without the spheres of horsemanship which unite, primarily or secondarily, all of the cultures discussed so far.
Gender Relations in Other Horse-Using Cultures

The secondary horse-using nations of Greece, Rome, Etruria, Assyria and Egypt have been considered in some detail, but others with long histories of horsemanship deserve mention.

Parthia

The Parthians were descended from semi-nomadic Iranian-speaking tribes of the Caspian Steppe region (Yablonsky, 1995a: 193), and their power flourished in the territory of present-day Iran in the last centuries of the First Millennium BC (contemporaneous with the Celtic La Tene in Europe), through the founding of their empire under Mithridates I in 171 BC, surviving until the beginning of the Sasanian period in AD 224. For much of their ascendancy they were heirs to the lands and power of the Achaemenid Persian Empire. The Parthians were warlike, and at their maximum extent held territories from the Caspian Sea to the Persian Gulf, and from Iraq to Bactria. The Parthians were, like the Celts, and the Scythians close to the end of their tenure, both fortress-builders, living in major urban centres, and major horse-users with certain tenets of nomadism still to some extent ordering their lives.

The Roman journalist Justin and the Greek Plutarch (ca AD 46 — 120) give us our ethnographic glimpse of the living Parthian culture, and we can recognise many aspects of a strong patriarchy. Women existed in a zanaan state even more severe than that of the Athenians, the Persians (in whose art women almost never appear (Hicks, 1975: 81 illustrates a rare exception), or the Paralatae, as not only were women unseen in public, they did not even dine at the same table as their husbands. Their dependence on the horse appears identical to that of the Scythians, as Justin describes it: “On horses they go to war, to banquets, to public and private tasks, and on them they travel, stay still, do business and chat,” (Justin, History of the World, XLI:III).
Parthian cavalry tactics have entered the language (the famous “Parthian shot,” corrupting into modern English as parting shot), but the manoeuvre was hardly unique to this culture. The Scythians and other Steppe cultures used it also, and a Greek bronze urn in the collection of the British Museum is decorated with figures around the lid demonstrating this archery technique (interestingly, the riders are female, thus the bronze is deemed Amazonomachy). Parthian heavy cavalry wore mailcoats, even chain mail horse trappings, and fought with lances (Kurtz, 1983: 561). The power of Parthian cavalry can be judged by the fact that Crassus’ campaign of 53 BC was a disaster. The situation was analogous to that facing Darius II in 514 BC, an infantry-based army coming up against competent cavalry, and losing. Indeed, according to Plutarch (Crassus) only Crassus’ Gaulish cavalry were much use in the fight, and even they were mauled by different technology and tactics.

Here we have an apparently-primary horse culture in which gender emancipation is nonexistent. Boyce (1983: 1158) outlines a rare recorded glimpse of Parthian women in their use as entertainers:

… minstrelsy for the delight or encouragement of others was widely cultivated by women. Singing girls are mentioned as commonly as dancers, and both accompanied the Parthian armies to war. Women’s minstrelsy is often mentioned for the Sasanian period in the Sha-nama.

Her sources for this are Plutarch and Rawlinson. Women appear to have been manipulated at chattel-level by the totally male-dominated Parthian society, and are seen as decoration as surely as amongst any other patriarchal culture.

Parthia existed on the fringes of the old Central Asian power structures, so we may observe a dissolution of female equality the later in time we move and the closer we approach the old patriarchal territories of the Assyrian, Babylonian and Persian Empires. This may well be an ingrained image of normative behaviour in the minds of the local peoples: peoples for whom the horse was merely a technological adaptation, and whose mobility and
facilitation were socially unavailable to women from the very beginning. In this the Parthians straddle the boundary between primary and secondary horse cultures, being the social product of long-established norms but adjusting those norms just far enough to embrace horsemanship as wholeheartedly as any Scythian.

The fall of Parthian culture however occasioned a reversal, as later in the Sasanian period women in Persia had at least some access to horsemanship. Laufer (1942): “In Persia, as well as in China, ladies enjoyed playing polo. The Persian poet Nizami (AD 1126 - 1200) describes in one of his poems how the beautiful Shirin, wife of Khusrau Parviz (sixth century), together with her ladies-in-waiting played polo against the king and his courtiers.” Riding may have been privileged, but it was not proscribed. This was near the end of the Sasanian Period; the empire fell in AD 624 and, as the new force of Islam swamped Persia 18 years later, these events very possibly closed this chapter of women’s liberty in the region.

**India**

Horses were bred in northwestern India, along the Indus, by around 1000 BC, and their use in war and sport are recorded in the Rig-Veda Hymns (Longrigg, 1972: 13). India is a classic secondary horse culture, and may be confidently categorized with Assyria, Egypt, Greece and Rome. Indian culture was already thousands of years old and the acquisition of fine breeding stock from Afghanistan, Bactria and elsewhere would have no effect on their already concreted gender roles. This compares with the Parthians and, inversely, Minoans (below).

**China**

Laufer’s reference to China (1942: 42 - 43) brings up the surprising possibility that women had access to horsemanship despite the strongly gender-polarised nature of Chinese society. Amongst grave goods have been found figurines of women playing polo, which was
introduced to China during the Tang dynasty of the 7th c AD. China, which had a fully-developed equestrian tradition from as early as 1250 BC (Linduff, 2003 : 140), discovered superior horses at the end of the 2nd c BC as far afield as Ferghana in Turkestan (Talbot-Rice, 1957 : 71; Clutton-Brock, 1992 : 104) and when appeals to buy stock failed they were taken by military force. First used solely by the emperor, their bloodline would have improved the local breed considerably so that by the era of Laufer’s comments China’s horses were largely comparable to those of the Middle East. The situation may be analogous to that in Persia in the same era, that riding was likely a privilege of wealth, not gender.

*Bronze Age Denmark*

The Danish Bronze Age was no stranger to the horse, exemplified by the famous Trundholm “sun chariot,” a bronze model recovered from a peat bog in 1902 and currently in the National Museum of Denmark. Dated to *ca* 1200 BC, and some 60cm in length, it depicts a fine-limbed horse pulling an elaborately-decorated “sun disk,” the whole mounted on six wheels (Briard, 1979).

Considering this much greater time-depth than the examples above, weapons are common female grave goods in the Danish Bronze Age, e.g., C. J. Thomsen’s late Montelius I to early Montelius II levels, the latter beginning *ca* 1400 BC. A bronze dagger seems to be a customary implement carried by, and buried with, both sexes. As the 1921 excavation of the “Egtved Girl” in eastern Jutland, and nearby in 1935 of “Skrydstrup Woman” also demonstrated, women in Denmark in 1500 BC could occupy positions of status, probably based on wealth, likely the equal of anything in contemporaneous Minoan Crete.

There were also similar relaxed attitudes to dress: the burial attire of the ~20-year old Egtved Girl is stunningly modern: her clothes are of finely-finished wool, comprising a boat-neck top with three-quarter sleeves and bare midrif, and a hipster miniskirt made of
looped woolen cord. Both burials featured oak coffins carved on-site, and burial mounds raised over the coffins, that at Skrydstrup being some 12m in diameter. What impact or effect horsemanship had on the gender relations of these times is at present an open question, but it remains significant in the terms of the present study that a culture with apparently relaxed attitudes to gender was also a horse-using culture.

Discoveries like these further justify the question of why high status female interments amongst the Celts should have been so vigorously resisted by some workers: they were hardly anything new to the archaeological world; perhaps merely their location amongst the foundations of extant Western culture may have prompted their differing interpretation.

**Gender Relations Divorced from Horsemanship**

The horse was not used by every culture. What can be said about gender relations in cultures which were neither primary nor secondary horse-users, nor necessarily warriors of note?

**Minoan Crete**

At a time when the horse was revolutionising warfare in Egypt’s New Kingdom, the Assyrians were still several hundred years from learning how to ride, and the Steppe peoples had yet to rediscover the freedom the horse had brought to earlier peoples on the “Sea of Grass,” a kingdom had reached its height in comparative isolation on the island of Crete.

The Minoan civilization, a derivative of Mycenaean culture certainly after 1450 BC (based on linguistic evidence), offers a superb example of considerable sexual equality in a peaceful, civilized, genteel society dedicated to art and physical perfection. Here, as Collin Renfrew points out in his foreword to *Lost World of the Aegean* (Edey, 1975), we see many founding qualities of our own culture, transmitted to us via the success of Greek culture a thousand years later, or what Boardman (1980 : 7) called “… that flame which the discerning
may still cherish in modern western civilization.” However, gender relationships are a red-letter exception, and the Classical Athenian would have been scandalised and affronted by the role of women in Minoan life.

Edey (1975 : 71-72) commenting upon the famous Ladies in Blue frescoe:

No society that did not admire women and give them a great deal of freedom could possibly have created such a work. That women were so admired is indicated over and over again by the discovery of other frescoes showing literally dozen of charming ladies, all similarly clad, all gesturing with a gracious artificiality reminiscent of the French court in the days of Fragonard or Boucher. In fact, one fragment, the face of a delicious minx with a retrouse nose, has come to be known as La Parisienne for her beguiling expression and her chic.

But women were not mere ornaments, admired for their beauty and grace. They appear to have held a remarkably emancipated position in Minoan society. They mingled freely with men, as they would not do even in progressive Athens a thousand or more years later. They figured prominently in religion, both as worshippers and priestesses. The chief Minoan deity turns out to have been a goddess.

Perhaps less shocking to Greeks would be the prominent role of women in Minoan religious life. Platon (1966 : 184) comments: “The highest offices of the priesthood were filled by members of the royal family, while the priestesses formed its principal order. There was also a category of priests who wore women’s clothes.” This latter evokes thoughts of the cross-gendered shamanic caste amongst the Steppe tribes that would be recorded by Herodotus a thousand years later, and far from the Mediterranean.

In J. D. S. Pendlebury's 1954 review Myres and Forsdyke also spoke of the “Minoan artistic genius,” in which glimpses of their life are preserved, revealing clues to gender-normative behavior.

Most successful in painting are the groups of spectators in the miniature frescoes from Knossos. Ladies of the court are drawn in detail as they talk vivaciously to one another beside a shrine… The spectacle in one of these paintings is a dance of girls. Another may have been a bull-fight, of which the action is well known from a later painted wall at Knossos [The ‘Toreador Frescoe’, c. 1500 BC or later]. At this one-sided game, in which girls as well as boys performed, the acrobat or victim stood in front of a charging bull, grasped its horns and turned a somersault along its back, an athletic feat which seems to be impossible. If the performers were expected to be killed, the ritual would be a form of human sacrifice, of which there is no other trace in Crete.
How the famous ‘bull-dancers’ of Crete are interpreted — did they have a religious significance, was it a punishment, an execution, or merely a sporting event — is a separate subject entirely, and germane here is the fact the frescoe unambiguously depicts the event as a co-educational institution. So whatever was happening, whether religious, legal or sporting, it applied evenly across the sexes.

It may be particularly significant that Minoan civilization was an island culture, nonetheless paralleling the Steppe peoples in that sexual equality evolved in isolation from the influences of outside forces: the Hittites, Babylon, Egypt — established regional powers with patriarchal agendas. In this same sense the Celts were “protected” by the Alps from wholesale acculturation with the Classical world, so the same mechanism may indeed apply, and in this is a factor to be carefully considered in the next chapter: is developmental isolation a more powerful social factor than the independence the horse offers in the occurrence of gender equality?

Gender equality, it should be remembered, does not equal class equality, and Minoan civilization was a slave-culture. With the deciphering, by Michael Ventris and John Chadwick in the early 1950s, (Edey, 1975 : 123-4) of the Linnear B tablets from the repositories in the palace at Knossos, it became clear that slaves were used in the Minoan textile industry, specifically women and children. Palmer (1963a : 125), describing the linguistic derivation of the translation, comments on the roles of women and children at Knossos: “One possible interpretation is that these tablets list women at various industrial establishments together with ‘apprentices’ at various crafts, which are indicated on the first syllabic sign.” Information in the Knossos tablets has been interpreted to indicate that the female and child slaves in the textile factories were rationed, accounted for and administrated with the same clerical notation as the sheep that provided the wool. Palmer (1963a : 119): “Just as the sheep are assigned to ‘owners’, so we find women too listed as the property of
the palace notables.” This is more than slightly reminiscent of the accountancy of black slaves in the early nineteenth century United States, and while it indicates low-status for such women and children in general, it does not reflect on gender roles amongst the controlling class.

Finally, horses were introduced to Minoan culture around this time. Longrigg (1972: 9) comments: “The Linear A tablets of Knossos, horseless, give way to the Linear B, which abound in horse’s heads, chariots, wheels, yokes, and whips.” The preexisting gender-relationships of the society would seem to have been as little perturbed by the introduction of the “new technology” of horsemanship as were those of the Parthians a thousand years later: each preserved its accustomed format, and thus became, in the end, secondary horse-users.

Polynesia

The cultures of the Pacific evolved in the isolation of the ocean from the influences of cultures on the neighbouring continents, while inheriting some factors (e.g., rootstock language) from their Asian precursors and maintaining a broad pan-oceanic cultural continuity. Ethnographic studies of ancient Polynesian culture (e.g., the writings of Abraham Fornander between 1877 and 1884) revealed a fiercely patriarchal warrior civilization in which the roles of women were, for the most part, minor. The male line was seen as “chiefly” and possessing of greater spiritual merit (the concept of mana, an ethereal force or property inherent to differing degree in all things and people), reinforcing a society in which highly complex patterns of kinship were woven around a male (additive) and female (subtractive) dichotomy. Goldman (1970: 15) said: “Not all Polynesian societies unequivocally acknowledge the superiority, by virtue of sanctity, of the male line. Enough do, however, even in western Polynesia (an area of Melanesian relationships), so that there is little reason
to doubt the importance of male line sanctity as one of the basic principles of status.”

Polynesia was divorced, obviously, from horsemanship, and fits the model of a patriarchal, pedestrian, warlike culture. It evolved in isolation and we may speculate that the parent culture which migrated through the Pacific bequeathed an already-rigid gender-based socio-religious system to the Polynesians, thus eliminating the possibility of isolation fostering a gender-egalitarian society as the culture adapted to the difficulties of its environment. This contrasts starkly with Minoan Crete, another island culture but with a very different mindset which itself likely at least partially evolved in isolation, but with a perspective polarised to the Polynesian outlook.

It is important to remember that much of the literature on the history of Polynesia is also subject to gender-biased scholarship, and mention of women’s lives and roles in some texts (Goldman, 1970; Fornander (1969 edition), in a 1000+ page collected volume has no index entry for women despite having married and learned his ethnography from a Hawaiian female chieftain) is almost nonexistent, other than to contrast and define the male role. This is again an absence of information, leading to construance, and must be treated cautiously.

Gender and Horsemanship: Discussion

Why were women free to express their independence in a swathe across the map from Danubia to China, and by consequence into Europe quarantined north of the Alps from the Mediterranean powers, and thus into the British Isles with the diaspora of the Celts, if they were thus free nowhere else on the mainland of the Old World?

Did any other culture take the horse to heart as did these? Almost certainly, no. Did the women of these peoples seize the arts of riding and war and make them their own in the face of male opposition? This we may never know, the supposition itself is almost an echo of the protestations of terrified patriarchies (and thus purely an artefact of our own norms), but
that at least some women did possess these skills is now self-evident. That the Celts of Europe shared these aspects with the Eurasian horse tribes is perhaps consequential, as the spread of mounted peoples out of Eurasia brought them into contact with the Eastern Celts by around 800 BC. That the explosion of Celtic society out of their Bronze Age Urnfield ancestors happened soon after this point in time may be the result of their absorption of horsemanship, their newfound skill in ironworking, or a combination of factors, one of which may well have been the vitality of a culture in which both sexes functioned productively at most or all levels of society. Nearly 1500 years later, the Brehon Laws enshrined rights and customs that would have been readily understandable to cultures 8000km distant and a millennium in the past, and the temptation is considerable to see a continuity of social thought across geographic populations, across borders and across time. However, as discussed in Chapter Seven, the nature of this acculturation is difficult to project due to, amongst other factors, the presence of the misogynist Scythian culture geographically between the Celts and the Sauromatians during the likely period of contact.

If the relationship between gender-equality and horsemanship was coincidental in these cultures, we might expect to see variations in its expression which would be mutually paradoxical amongst the sample group. Were there peoples who proscribed access to the horse for some women but not others (leaving aside the obvious issues of slavery and poverty)? For some purposes, but not others? Life-roles are synonymous with and perceived through their own tangible expression read in the archeological context, so such questions may be unanswerable: was a female soldier who took the reins of a chariot in the Ireland of Cormac Mac Art doing anything qualitatively different to a warrior woman patrolling the steppes north of the Jaxartes five hundred years earlier? No: both were warriors therefore their remains or references to them illustrate their life-role unambiguously.

To discover the origin of their access to that role would mean tracing their social
niche far into the past, and this verges on anthropological investigations not yet attempted. The lack of dependable sources is crucial here: the filtration of data via patriarchal cultures broadly blocks us from knowing the historic peoples amongst whom this social formula first matured.

Was it an Indo-European, or Proto-Indo-European, institution? Was gender-equality on the horse’s back a matter of utility, of gross function, that a tribe fielding a hundred warriors, irrespective of their sex, had double the long-range striking power of a tribe that fielded merely fifty men? It may be as simple as this: an adaptive advantage to survival in a hostile or uncertain world. Hand in hand with this functional argument, it may also be that broad gender-equality was a part of their cultural makeup from extreme antiquity, for the very same reasons, and when the horse became a resource it was utilised by both sexes as a matter of course. In addition, if activities caused the sexes to separate at certain times (such as herding on the summer pasturage, as is still found today), women must be capable of self-defense against the common practice of wife-raiding by other tribes, a further functional argument in a different context.

To answer this question definitively would require minute examination of subtle clues in the material record of the target cultures, as far backward in time as the materials stretch, and, most importantly of all, the ability to view the resulting data sans Classically-tinted glasses: to avoid the bias which has been demonstrated to afflict interpretations of a large part of the historic and archaeological opus.

The next chapter brings together the arguments from the preceding chapters and embellishes them with additional cases. The conjunction of sociocultural markers, including customs, language and gender-norms, between widely-dispersed geographic populations is briefly examined, as is the difficulty the descent of such norms to our society poses when we attempt to interpret past cultures. Drawing these themes together, the Discussion makes the final case for dismissing prior assumptions in the archeological process.
Chapter Seven:

Discussion and Conclusions

From the foregoing chapters, we have a scheme of past societies of Indo-European descent, of largely Caucasoid stock, which by migration and the forced relocations of many centuries carried elements of marked gender equality (contrasting with that of the Classical heritage and other patriarchies) across the Old World to points as distant as Western China from Western Ireland. A concurrent sociocultural marker is primary horsemanship, which it is here hypothesised fostered such a situation, or was a mechanism which reinforced a preexisting condition. We have a (thin) amalgam of germane historical documentation, which we have considered in some detail along with the biases of both original sources and modern scholarship; and we have a considerable weight of archaeological materials for which analysis and interpretation are continuing.

Past work has assessed gender in two ways: 1) direct anthropometric analysis of remains to determine sex, accompanied by analysis of grave goods, and 2) by creating an index of bimodal grave goods which is assumed to relate to differences in sex. Over-dependence on the latter (evolved to cater to cases of insufficient skeletal materials to facilitate analysis, but thereafter applied questionably) has created a significant degree of sexing-inaccuracy in some mortuary populations, especially amongst ancient European peoples.

Social trends in the past hundred years of archeological thought has given rise to much bias in analysis, demarking certain conclusions as inadmissible. This situation is now in a state of redress permitting reexamination of previously ignored or dismissed materials. This work carries a contemporary political agenda as it bears upon the issue of gender equality in modern culture.
Arnold (1991 : 373) states:

What I am arguing is that there were certain conditions in Iron Age society in which women were able to occupy high status positions, whether by dint of ability, marriage, birth, or a combination of all three. This happened frequently enough to warrant closer examination, and we should begin by admitting the possibility that women played a decisive, and occasionally paramount role in the upper echelons of Iron Age society. The picture we have of Iron Age society at present is grossly oversimplified in favor of a male dominated world view, and it will take a reexamination of the material evidence from a new perspective to change the prevailing attitude.

The problem in extant interpretive methodology may be easily highlighted. In light of the modern discoveries amongst the Steppe Cultures and the apparent paucity of female weapon graves amongst the Celts (which it must be remembered is an observation based on much older work than the Saka and Sarmatian finds), it would be appropriate to reiterate the comment from Effros (2000) quoted in the Introduction: “Because a woman’s grave containing weaponry remains inconceivable, current methodological dictates mean that none will ever be found.” A generation on from Renate Rolle’s first publication of female warrior graves there is still an almost tangible resistance to the notion that traditionally male roles (in our own cultural idiom) may have been available to women in other cultures in the past, thus the kind of automatic gender reassignment applied to exhumations, even in the modern age, to which Witt (1997) refers.

Some of those instances may be quite revealing, e.g., those 11 graves from Saxon Britain which appeared to contain both female skeletons and weapons (Härke, 1997), and doubtless other cases will emerge.

Even more surprising would be a female warrior from Greece post about the seventh century BC, or from the Roman world at any point. No less surprising may be the female warrior graves of Scythian territories if they do indeed belong to the Scythian culture: these would probably constitute the most paradoxical information of all, as they would defy all other known sources.
But if the apparent model holds good, that the Scythians were a strongly patriarchal culture that maintained a *zanaan* system, the Paralatae become the only Old World primary horse-using culture in which women did *not* have at least some options in terms of self-expression, self-determination, or responsibilities besides the (segregated) hearth. In which case, the ethnic affiliations of those forty or more known inhumations may be referred with some confidence to either the Sarmatians, suggesting incursions of Scythian territory prolonged enough for it to be worth investing in fixed mortuary structures, or to some other, as yet unidentified, mobile ethnic grouping.

If those graves belong outside Scythian culture, whatever their ethnicity, where does that leave the Scythians in terms of the evolution of gender relations within a horse-culture, and how does it influence the Celts with whom they interacted to some degree?

The obvious conclusion is that the Scythians had existed in a state of essentially unchanging pastoralism long enough for their social structure to be as concreted as that of any centralised state, and that the wholesale reorganisation of the culture to embrace equestrian nomadism made absolutely no difference to that, much as the Parthian model also demonstrates. That the other Steppe peoples further east thought and behaved differently may have been a source of friction but it is just as clear that *no* acculturative exchange took place between the Paralatae and, e.g., the Sauro-Sarmatians, at least at this level. The gender norms of neither were assimilated by the other, and it is significant that the Scythians took at least in part to the ways of the Greeks — who shared their attitudes to gender, i.e., they shared a fundamental common ground that allowed them to understand each other in ways that would automatically exclude the Saka, Sarmatians, or, very possibly, the Celts.

Celtic metalworking may have been premium merchandise that overcame cultural differences, however, and an economic exchange would not necessarily have involved a cross-pollination of any ideas which either party was not prepared to tolerate. Horsemanship
seems to have gone west by complicated routes, but archery as a primary form of combat did not, nor did either party seem to make any significant impact on the religious or social institutions of the other. Ironically, the social structure of the Celts bears more resemblance to that of the Saka, from thousands of kilometres beyond the likely zone of acculturation: consider the commonality of shamanic inhumations — similar cultic artefacts are found in east and west, in female graves, but not in Scythia proper. (It should be noted however that oval altar stones, red ochre, mirrors, spoons and cowrie shells are found in kurgans of the North Caucasus region (Petrenko, 1995: 19), though not as yet explicitly recognised as associated with female inhumations. Should this situation change, perhaps with osteological review or competent analysis of fresh materials, it would call for a revised hypothesis of gender roles in Scythian culture.) There are further examples of this apparent commonality between cultures at the extremes of physical separation, examined below.

If it can be generally supported that gender role access was much wider in some past societies than has traditionally been believed, it is fair to ponder what became of these social attitudes. Where did this mindset go? Why did it die out of the world so effectively that its one-time existence must be rediscovered by ethno-archaeology?

The various cultural nodes embodying high-status females, and especially access to high cultic office and warrior designation, were spread across thousands of miles of territory and as much as 1500 years. They range from the early Sauromatian materials in the east and a (here postulated but not yet materially supported) status equivalent amongst latest Urnfield/Hallstatt B peoples in the west, up to the decline of the independent woman in Ireland during the 8th c AD; and the mobilisation of women as warriors in the armies of Genghis Khan around AD 1207.

In each of these cases, the cultures in which gender role equality was available were subject to inundation and annexation by other cultures over time, and a part of the
acculturative process would seem to be the suppression of the right of high status for women. The Celtic-speaking peoples were christianised, with varying degrees of success, in the middle and later centuries of the First Millennium AD in Ireland, Scotland and Wales, while the descendants of the Sarmatians, the Alani, in escaping the overwhelming power of the Huns (with whom they evidently were antipathetic and did not enter into a military partnership), settled in northern Spain, and even as far afield as North Africa (Mallory, 1989: 48). In both instances, the localities in which these peoples chose to remain became centres for the most powerful dominion of Catholicism in later centuries. In the east, Islam had reached the steppes by the 10th century, spreading throughout ancient, sprawling Kwarazm, Khorasan and other steppe nations (Bosworth, 1968) and while the civilised, ancient Kwarasm was the first great victim of the Mongol expansion, Islam itself did not share the fate of its citizens. It took root amongst the Mongols and was transmitted by them in the following centuries south into India where the Moghul Empire flourished, and Islam remains established in Central Asia today.

However, it is important to note that at both extremes of the old “swathe of gender equality” that once crossed the map of the world, Christianity and Islam have both encountered limited success in their social prohibitions against women.

In Kazakhstan and Mongolia, riding and archery remain the national sports and pastimes, taught equally to males and females, and women retain considerable power under traditional laws which maintain significance and relevance alongside, and often in conflict with, Islam (Davis-Kimball, 2002: 43). For instance, the steppe tribes never adopted purdah: it was impractical, and the exigencies of nomadic life and the traditionally vague divisions of labour did not allow for a zanaan model. In the writings of Herodotus we can see suggestions of a “modified zanaan” situation amongst the Paralatae which is echoed by the modern situation, yet the question must still be whether Herodotus accurately recorded his
observations or interpreted them into a Greek model which has biased our view ever since.

In Ireland, the aggressive spirit of the Irish woman has entered the vernacular mindset, and while the imperatives of the church have ordered patterns of behaviour, the underlying assertiveness of the Gaelic female persona speaks eloquently of an age when there were no prohibitions against its expression in professional, martial and socially determinant contexts. Thompson (1996: 21) says: “... according to *The Book of Ballymote* and other Irish manuscripts, Celtic women did, in fact, serve as warriors — in addition to serving in most of the important trades, including the bards (poets/musicians), the medical and legal professions and the Druid priesthood.” This evokes images of a society far more like our own than other cultures contemporary to early Ireland.

Renate Rolle summed up in 1980 with this statement:

Interpretations of the Amazon graves leave many questions unanswered. Furthermore, those offered so far are both unsatisfactory and varied in nature. Whatever the case, it is certain that the way of life of the stock-breeding nomads of the steppe provided the best conditions for the participation of women in hunting and in contests on horseback, and in other martial contests — in all of which we may assume they took a natural pleasure.

*Conjunction of Cultural Traits between the Extremes*

Ireland and Kazakhstan are over 8000 km apart, and their pagan, gender-egalitarian cultures were at their height displaced by seven or eight centuries. Given such separations, there are surprising commonalities in their social fabric, commonalities that seem to go beyond the definition of simple acculturative exchange (which by definition must have taken place in early Hallstatt times in the Danubian region) and which included the oft-cited horsemanship, trouser-wearing, torc-wearing, headhunting and using skulls as drinking vessels. But there are other similarities, and in her roundup of Central Asian cultural traits and markers, Davis-Kimball (2002) enumerates aspects a Celtic scholar would recognise at once.
Amongst the Pokrovka mortuary population, as many as five different social roles have been identified for women — hearth women, priestess, warrior, warrior-priestess, and a fifth category into which some individuals were placed (Davis-Kimball, 1998). This division was found to hold good throughout the region and time-depth. A similar number, if a different selection, e.g., hearth-woman, priestess (Ban-Drui?), warrior, bard, or professional person (doctor, lawyer, etc.), may be observed amongst the Gaels.

A problem with the origins of warrior women in east and west concerns priority. It is usually assumed that acculturative contact transmitted steppe ideas to the Celts, and gender equality may be one of those ideas. But the height of the warrior women on the steppes comes in the centuries after contact is thought to have occurred, and amongst cultures with significant social differences to the Scythians with whom the Hallstatt peoples are most likely to have come into contact, following the absorbance/disappearance of the Cimmeri in Urnfield times. We know too little about the Cimmeri to state whether they may have transmitted notions of gender-egalitarian behavior. If wider access to roles for women in the west occurred in reaction to contact with the east, the vectors of transmission are as yet unclear, and if they occurred independently then acculturation plays no part in the “gender fabric” of the Celts at all. However, Celtic burials, metalwork and Gallic-derived place-names are known from a large number of sites in the Ukraine, dating from mid-fourth to mid-third c. BC, thus some degree of direct contact between Celtic peoples and Early Sarmatian tribes should not be ruled out. Nevertheless, this contact lies too late in time to have been instrumental in the transmission of gender constructs east or west.

The kind of acculturation we’re looking for, at an appropriate time-depth, is not yet supported, and this reawakens the notion that shared social markers may represent ancestral Indo-European traits rather than derived characteristics. Gender equality however, remains absent from the known Indo-European equation, comfortably refuting the theory unless we
postulate an Indo-European branch which embraced sexual equality and migrated both east and west. This is so simplistic it verges on the fascicle, and the puzzle of common attributes remains.

Does any physical marker encompass all of the territories under consideration, allowing for migrations in subsequent times to further spread abstract concepts? Other than such staples as spindle-whorls, mirrors or daggers which are universal tools, yet subject to regional stylistic differences, there is perhaps only one which crosses all boundaries throughout Temperate and Holarctic latitudes of the Old World: the *olenniye kamni*.

*Olenniye kamni* are “the so-called deer-stone stelae with engraved depictions of characteristically stylized deer,” (Volkov, 1995 : 325). These standing stones are associated with kurgan complexes and slab-grave cemeteries, but are known from enormous reaches of Eurasia, and beyond. In addition to engraved depictions of deer, the stelae also feature other animals, as well as what have been interpreted as necklaces and belts around the vertical stones, the latter with clear depictions of weapons and tools hanging from them, such as bows, *gorytus*, axes and whetstones. Zoomorphic designs are distinctive, anthropomorphic elements are heavily abstracted, and human faces have rarely been identified. Volkov (1995 : 325-326) discusses the puzzle in some detail:

Similar to the Scythian triad which includes armament, horse harness sets, and animal style art, the *olenniye kamni* have not been connected with any specific culture. In eastern Mongolia, as in Transbaikalia, the stelae are frequently found as corner stones for slab graves. In the west they were included in the stone architectural kurgan complexes which included a fence. In Tuva the sculptures are found standing near the Uyuk Culture kurgans...

A number of stones classified as *olenniye kamni* are recorded from Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Orenburg in the southern Urals, the Caucasus and southern Georgia. But they are also confidently identified much further west. Volkov (1995 : 326) continues:

A few *olenniye kamni* are known from Olbia in the Black Sea region, in the Nikolaev province in the Dneiper River region, and in the Crimea. Two such stelae are recorded in the region of Dobrudja, northeastern Bulgaria. More than
15 such stones have been discovered in Europe and in the Caucasus. The western border for the *olenniye kamni* is at Seehauzen, Germany, on the River Elbe...

In summary, the most recent data indicate that the *olenniye kamni* are widespread over a vast territory stretching from the upper reaches of the Amur River in eastern Siberia to the Elbe River in the west. The regions where the sculptures have been found also coincides with the “great steppe zone” of Eurasia. This indicates that the deer stones are very important for determining the historical routes followed by the early nomads.

The majority of *olenniye kamni* are known from Mongolia and Transbaikalia, suggesting a cultural root-point in this area. One was incorporated into the stoneworks of the great Arzhan Kurgan in Tuva.

If these standing stones are the footprint of a culture which moved throughout these regions, might this people be the progenitor group which transmitted the gender constructs we are tracking in space and time? Volkov (1995 : 326), with regard to the weapon-types engraved on the stelae, notes: “Some weapons are notable for their Karasuk stylization making it possible to date the stelae from the late 2nd to early 1st millenium B.C.” This is a candidate applicable time-depth for a pan-Eurasian transmission to account for common concepts, in terms of gender norms and shamanic religion, in descendant cultures throughout the range of the *olenniye kamni*, but the latest stones date from the mid-1st millennium BC, within the known time depth of the later cultures. Were these made by later peoples as a continuity of tradition? Detailed comparison of artistic style and tooling marks would offer insights into this question. By the 6th c. BC *olenniye kamni* were replaced in the Black Sea region by Scythian *baba* sculpture, an as-yet unexplained transition. On this point, Volkov concludes (1995 : 330-331):

A possible explanation is offered by A. A. Iessen who wrote that “there was no significant difference in the cultural development level of the historically known Cimmerians and the Scythians of that early period” and that “we can see that the creators of the 8th-7th centuries B.C. complexes in the pre-caucasus steppe and those in the North Black sea steppe were ancestors of both the 6th century B.C. Scythians and of the Cimmerians.”

The motifs found on the *olenniye kamni* reveal that nomadic pastoralism, technological achievements which include fighting chariots and saddle horses, and
the vivid and original animal style art emerged earlier than has been previously believed. Artisans graphically visualized new forms. The rapid, dynamic contacts between cultural regions were conducive to the intensified cultural integration. This in turn was the basis for the Scytho-Saka-Siberian unity within the early nomadic culture.

Although specialists have not entirely agreed upon the dating of the Arzhan kurgan, it is considerably earlier than the Scythian monuments from southern Russia. The early date of Arzhan kurgan, together with the _olenniye kamni_ sculptures, requires scholars of the Early Iron Age to consider the possibility that eastern Central Asia was the origin, not only of the animal style art, but also of the entire Scytho-Saka-Siberian culture.

To this we might add the postulate that this region was a centre of matrifocal religion and gender-egalitarian social norms, that these ancestors bequeathed them to the steppe cultures across Eurasia and transmitted them, perhaps, to the Urnfield peoples of Europe at the western extremity of the _olenniye kamni_ range; thereby setting in place the social norms descendant in the Celts and recorded in the Irish law tracts without need for acculturative contact across the north Black Sea region. Why the Scythians and perhaps other peoples in the region do not seem to reflect these social norms remains a question for study.

The Saka settlers brought with them from the steppes a powerful female deity, Anaitis, identified with the Assyrian Mylitta and the Greek “Aphrodite Urania”, which became the chief deity of Bactria, her great temple in Bactra being especially opulent (Rawlinson, 1912 : 10). But even amongst the patriarchal Scyths strong female deities remained (e.g., Tabiti, Api, Agrimpasa (also identified with A. urania),) which Ustinova (cited in Davis-Kimball, 2002 : 69) suggests may represent the persistence of tenets from an earlier, perhaps matriarchal, period. Certainly it seems strange that so fiercely masculine a culture as the Scythians should have a female figure at the head of their pantheon if she does not represent a powerfully ingrained remainder of a society with somewhat different values.

The sheer power of this figure in the cultural mind of the Eurasian peoples can be judged by its persistence throughout all intervening times: Talbot-Rice (1957 : 182-183)
speaks of the Scythian goddess cult passed down to the Slavs who inherited the steppes, a cult practiced in woodland groves until just prior to the Second World War in ceremonies that involved circle-dancing and the veneration of horsemen. Beyond even the significance of paganism surviving despite centuries of Christian influence, these attributes are as wholly “Celtic” as they are steppe-derived. This in itself may be merely a popular perception of a more widespread phenomenon: Zimmer (1990 : 331) comments apropos of commonalities of religious tradition amongst disparate peoples, “Similar to the veneration of sacred stones is the worshipping of trees, found not only in Greece, but also amongst many other Indo-European peoples. The custom is probably genuinely Indo-European, and possibly elementary human.” Thus disparate peoples are further conjoined, however tenuously.

Oral heritage is a common factor: the Celts transmitted the bulk of their knowledge by the spoken word, and a formalised system of transmission persists to the present day amongst the Kazakh peoples, where aites, singing contests, trace the history and heritage of the tribes. Men and women alike compete (Davis-Kimball, 2002 : 39). This is redolent of the oral genealogy of the Scots, practiced as a spoken form as late as the 18th century.

The ancient Irish cultic practice of the horse-feast at the ascension of a king has Asian connections also. The feast, it is claimed, was performed as late as the 12th century AD. It is significant that in Giraldus Cambrensis’ account, the king-elect first has intercourse with the chosen white mare, whereafter she is killed, cooked, and the king bathes in and consumes the broth. Ross (1986 : 95) states:

There is some very good evidence — although it has been hotly denied by some scholars — of the custom of the mating of the king during his inaugural rights with the territorial goddess in the form of a pure white mare. In India, where the practice was also known, the mating was symbolic, whereas in Ireland it was at one time evidently fully carried out, later becoming symbolic. There is a rite described by Giraldus Cambrensis as apparently still pertaining in his day in one of the northern kingdoms, which is clearly a survival of this practice. It has been thought to have been a disgusting and shameful invention on the part of the Welsh writer in order to discredit the Irish; but evidence clearly is strong enough to make it quite clear that the observations of Giraldus were correct, even though he did not
appreciate the ancient ritual origins. He describes the performance as a ‘barbarous and abominable’ rite. The tribe in question was an Ulster one, and the ritual was still practiced in AD 1185 if the report given to Giraldus was correct. In front of the assembled tribe a white mare was led in, and the king went to it on all fours and mated with it.

Ross then quotes Giraldus’ description of the bathing and feast, and adds:

The rite is paralleled by the Hindu horse-sacrifice on a similar occasion — here, however, it was the king’s wife who united herself with the powers of fertility, not the king himself.

Horse-feasting was used in a cultic light in Central Asia in the mid-First Millennium BC (Rolle, 1989 : 34-35), and a petroglyph from Tamgaly has been interpreted as a shamanic figure inseminating a horse (Davis-Kimball, 2002 : 83). Given the cultic status ascribed to the Irish kings, the parallels are striking.

Given the likely extreme antiquity of the origins of such fertility rites (Mallory, 1989 : 136), it is not unreasonable to speculate that, at least in this instance, we may be seeing an echo of the Indo-European rootstock that gave rise to both cultures: a mode of thought so ingrained in the abstract outlook that it survived the hand-down and interpretation through which the cultures themselves diversified and became socially and geographically distinct.

In contrast, the equivalent rite practiced in India is polarised: India was the seat of ancient patriarchal social systems, and while it is perhaps surprising for a goddess-related rite to be recalled and practiced in such a scenario, it is not surprising that it was inverted in form.

Ross seems very definite in her confidence that Giraldus’ account is accurate and supportable, indeed she is often boldly definite in many of her statements, yet accounts such as this have an element of outrageousness that rivals many of the claims of Herodotus (or Poseidonius or Diodorus Siculus). Giraldus apparently recorded such events second-hand, as did his Ionian ethnographic predecessor. Why should we be any more inclined to believe one than the other? Because Giraldus was a Christian scribe in an age closer to our own does not necessarily make him a more reliable source, and indeed there seems more archaeological
evidence for Herodotus’ various observations than for the perpetuation of such cultic practice into medieval times.

On other cultic beliefs, no less significant is the burial in one of the Pazyryk tombs (Rudenko, 1970) of a non-functional (therefore symbolic) *chariot* (Davis-Kimball, pers. comm.) The steppe tribes were riders, not charioteers, but the abstract value of a vehicle was not lost on them, and cultic significance attaches as surely as to the waggon-bier and chariot graves of the Celts, or (an identical idea in a different context) the “solar-boats” of the Egyptians (Reeves, 1990). Six dismantled chariots and 35 boats, the latter mostly models, were amongst the thousands of items interred with Tutankhamun, though amongst such a fabulous (if haphazardly assembled) (Gutgesell, 1998 : 366) trove their cultic “final journey” significance tends to be obscured. There were no horse materials in the tomb, though chariot teams appeared in a number of illustrations.

An even closer parallel between the Celts and the steppe tribes lies in their attachment of sacred significance to birds: the Celts held many birds as sacred, especially swans, herons, ibis and other waterbirds, and the Pazyryk ‘carriage’ was decorated with highly representational white swans, made from felt (Rudenko, 1970, Plate 166.) The swan motif also featured in bridle fittings (Plate 97a) and straps (Fig. 64, p127). Swans are lake birds, and lakes are rare in Central Asia. Thompson (1996 : 26) points out the Indo-European root word for owl is *ul*, a remarkably straight-line descent all the way to modern English. Perhaps a sacred perception of birds helped minimise linguistic distortion over time and distance. Indeed, the cultic significance of the owl in the region is undiminished, as Kazakhs in western Mongolia use their feet, wings and feathers as protective amulets over infants’ beds.

Are these similarities coincidental? The probability of two unassociated cultures developing such specific but abstract commonalities is low. Do the similarities proceed from common origin, i.e., are they Indo-European roostock attributes that survived over time and
were expressed in parallel in daughter cultures? Are they the result of acculturative contact? Without more information on the timing and location of the appearance of such attributes in the material record it would be unwise to say more than that *some* acculturation between daughter cultures may have occurred, but that the extent of its effect on each partner is currently quite unknown.

And what of the Tocharians? This little-known ethnic group in western China flourished about the same time as the height of pagan culture in Ireland (~2nd c BC, to an unknown date around the middle of the First Millennium AD) and have left written documents (Buddhist manuscripts of the 6th - 8th c AD, translated out of an Indic script) in A- and B-type languages which linguists have related most closely to the Italo-Celtic languages of the west (though they share commonalities with many other European languages also). Schmidt (1990) reviews this issue in detail. Mummies from Chinese Turkestan exhibit red hair (Davis-Kimball, 2002: 137, 149), a trait globally confined almost completely to the Celtic genestock. Artworks provide further indications, with the Wu-Sun and Yueh-Xi horse nomads whose territories occupied pasturelands actually within the Tocharian states (Kucha, Karashahr and Turfan) on their north side, as sharing red hair and green eyes with their neighbours. Red hair persists today amongst some Kazakh children in western Mongolia (Davis-Kimball, pers. Comm). These physical and linguistic similarities naturally spawned vigorous debate, which according to Mallory “comprise a remarkably large percentage of Tocharian scholarship” (1989: 56) The Kucheans practiced skull deformation, a cultural marker most closely associated with the Huns, but which had already appeared at Pokrovka (c. 200 BC) and in Kazakhstan some hundred years earlier again. Archaeological evidence from the Tarim Basin region remains limited and doubtless much productive work will emerge from this area in future.

Mallory (1989: 61) offers the cautious possibility that the linguistic cognates with
European derivative languages represent the survival of a strong Indo-European mothertongue, and that this is both simpler and more compelling than early proposals of a west-east migration of Europoid peoples. This, however, leaves the issue of red hair and green eyes as a mystery, and this latter per force leaves open the possibility of some presently unguessable vector of transmission by which genes, words and, for the purposes of this discussion, social mores associated with gender behaviour, may have been transmitted between geographic populations over 4000km apart. Genetic investigations may one day provide associative patterns that will help clarify this issue. However, in the absence of information concerning the actual gender behaviour of the Tocharians and neighbouring cultures (excepting of course the better-known Saka), and limited archaeological work to date, any notion of such a vector contributing to a communication of concepts of gender-equality between Europe and Central Asia becomes even more tenuous.

Transmission Vectors

The Sarmatian culture, along with probably elements of the Saka confederacy (who it seems were scattered and absorbed by more powerful invaders), were forced westward by the Huns. Hunnish remains, identified clearly by their bound/distorted skulls (“artificial cranial deformation”) (Taylor, 1994: 376), appear as early as the 2nd century AD in the South Ural Steppe (Davis-Kimball, pers. comm.) and the new power-culture in the region seems to have erased much that went before. Records from literate neighbours are not apparent, and the archaeology is thin, but there are grounds for supposing the Huns may have descended out of the Hsiung-Nu, which suggests at least some carry-over in terms of gender-equality may have existed. The Romans recorded no Hunnish warrior women, but as the experience with the Celts demonstrates, this is not necessarily significant. Is this how the old gender-egalitarian social norm was transmitted to the future? Alternately, the Huns did not completely erase the
cultures with which they collided. Bokovenko (1995c: 295) states: “It appears that the Hun advancement into the west only partially affected the Altai culture and that the local population was successful in preserving the Scythian traditions for some time afterwards.” In this context, “Scythian” refers to the broad cultural suite; thus Altaian culture may have preserved this norm.

The Mongols mobilised the female portion of their community a thousand years later, the only concession to differing status seemingly being their deployment in a defensive rather than offensive capacity, possibly echoing the Hsiung-Nu model (Trippett, 1975: 136). And records of the era of Ghengis Khan and his descendants outline a state in which female political power was considerable, a social structure that allowed a woman to serve as regent over vast areas of the empire, including control of the army. The decades after the death of Ghengis Khan in AD 1227 are a history of powerful regents and women who vied for control of Eurasia (Davis-Kimball, 2002: 223-228).

Extant traditional customs in Central Asia today reflect a strong heritage of female participation in community affairs, strong enough to overstep the dictates of Islam, so this state of being was clearly perpetuated despite sociocultural effects during the intervening Hunnish age. Is there a parallel in the west, with the span of time between the ancient Gaelic age when women may indeed have enjoyed an unusual degree of social freedom, and the modern age when those freedoms have been regained, separated by the strictures of the intervening Christian age?

Did the Scythians yield before the Sarmatians at least partly because the invaders could mobilise a larger proportion of their adult population for war? Sarmatian women were not dependent on men in the way Scythian women were compelled to be, and were able to contribute, probably significantly, to the armed incursion of the Ukraine west of the Don, and to the exertion of Sarmatian power in the Pontic Steppe thereafter.
Horsemanship and Female Independence: A Coincidental or Consequential Relationship?

Horsemanship is strong amongst gender-egalitarian cultures, so did one foster the other? With all due caution, the relationship may be deemed conditionally consequential. The examples of the Parthians, Minoans, Greeks, Romans, Indians and others, the secondary horse cultures, demonstrate that the acquisition of horsemanship as a cultural artefact is irrelevant to preexisting gender norms: it did not affect the status of women in those cultures. However, amongst primary horse cultures (those cultures whose social characteristics were broadly dependent on the horse from their earliest recognized inception) we find broader gender-role commonality (with the single exception of the Scythians).

It is here postulated that the exigencies of nomadic lifestyle on the steppes and of semi-sedentary settlement in Europe had already brought about a division of labour and modes of social thought in which the sexes, at each level of social stratification, functioned in broadly equivalent roles, and the horse came to these societies as a common resource from earliest times. With access to the self-determinant properties of horsemanship, gender roles remained balanced in these cultures for many centuries until social change occurred due to other factors, e.g., the Christianisation of Ireland in the west, or the rise of Islam in the east.

Observations on Offensive and Defensive Roles Amongst the Sauro-Sarmatians

Davis-Kimball (1998) sums up in part that females likely served a defensive warrior role, as mentioned by Han Chinese texts apropos of the Hsiung Nu (2002: 65-66), though in this case their status was concubine, at least until the fighting started, the converse of which is that males occupied an offensive role. However she also notes that the comparatively poor quality of military equipment amongst the Sauro-Sarmatian peoples seems to rule out offensive warfare. The problem here is that 94% of male graves at Pokrovka were assigned to warrior status. If they were not available as an offensive force, what role did they play in
society? And were they thus buried with warrior trappings merely ideologically? This seems overwhelmingly unlikely. The quality of hardware is also open to interpretation. The bronze trilobite arrowheads of the Sauromatian and Early Sarmatian period accompanying warrior inhumations of both sexes were considered to be of poor manufacture, and suggested to the assessing workers (Davis-Kimball and Leonid Yablonsky) that warfare was not of prime importance to these peoples (or they would invest more effort in the making of weapons.) Their bronzeworking was otherwise excellent, non-belligerant artifacts, e.g., mirrors, being of high quality. The contrast in quality of artefact materials was established by metallurgical studies performed by Mark Hall.

However, trilobite arrowheads are designed to imbed in the body of the target and resist removal, therefore an accurate hit almost certainly results in the loss of the arrowhead. Whether well-made or poor, it is equally lethal in this sense, so its quality may be a redundant factor in whether the weapon was used offensively or defensively. Finally, if the article will be lost when used, why invest more effort in its making than strictly necessary? For these reasons it can be argued that the Sauro-Sarmatians were fully capable of offensive warfare.

At Pokrovka male warrior inhumations outnumber female six to one, while female roles fall into at least five categories, reflecting the much wider range of life choices available to women, compared to men, in the Sauro-Sarmatian culture.

_A Final Observation Concerning Perspective_

Even after decades of excavational and interpretive work, and the gradual move to embrace the possibilities for past societies that this work suggests, there remains a hesitancy concerning “the role of gender roles” as an aspect of culture.

It now appears fully supportable (despite the lingering traditionalist view) that
amongst many “barbarian” peoples women enjoyed access to a range of social roles unavailable to them in the “civilised” Mediterranean cultural stream. These roles included high religious office in cultic and shamanic contexts; a role in the artistic, professional, economic, political and legal structures of their societies; the right of self-determination, extending into (and after) marriage; and, in a variety of forms, the right and ability to bear arms as warriors.

But despite this range of possibilities, the schism between them and the traditional viewpoint remains so strong that difficulty clearly remains in identifying a woman outside the scope of hearth and home as any other than royal, cultic or warlike. The most prominent women in the Irish sagas are divine beings in mortal guise, shamanic or otherwise possessed of magical powers (Medb, Scathach, Aithne etc.): rarely are they simply mortal women who have the capacity for independent action (e.g., Nessa, Emer). Similarly, in evaluating the status goods in the material record, the Vix “princess” has been nominated as a priestess (Cremin, 1992: 16; Knusel, 2002) as surely as the occupants of so many tombs across Central Asia (for which evidence in the form of reliably repeating suites of cultic artefacts is far less ambiguous). The point here is that there remains a difficulty in accepting that a woman was merely independently respected, rich or powerful, and was buried with the things that denoted this status — not a holder of religious office, nor necessarily even an elite warrior. In a society in which gender-equality reached significant levels, it must surely have happened, and it is a worthwhile caveat that we not be obsessed with cultic or elite markers to the point that we cannot recognise it. It is an old axiom that if an artefact or its context cannot be readily ascribed a functional role, then “it must be religious in origin.” This is a self-propagating snare in logic and is being applied to people as surely as objects.

A stratum of past societies is in danger of being relegated to this archaeological “too-hard basket,” sometimes possibly still for the want of our seeing women as equal
members of those societies. There is less to be surprised at in this difficulty than one might think. For instance, would an ancient Gaulish woman who ran a merchant business, trading with the Greeks be unthinkable? Yes, not simply because the Greeks would have had difficulty doing business with a woman, but because there remains an underlying issue with the notion in the modern mindset (quite distinct from whether ancient Gaulish practice would or would not have allowed such a thing to exist). Evidence suggests that amongst those most-machismic of past peoples, the Vikings, women traditionally controlled finances. Elsie Rosedahl, (1991 : 60) does not believe women played a direct role in trade, while Jeannine Davis-Kimball favours the opposite viewpoint, concluding some 25% of Viking women interred in the Volga region were the primary merchants of the community (pers. comm).

The moral remains: assume nothing, especially concerning the boundaries of gender roles. Ongoing accumulation of information suggests they are not the rigid fortress past scholars depended upon to infer order upon lost cultures, but indeed are more likely amongst the most ephemeral qualities the human condition, as a global phenomenon, has ever contended with.

**Conclusions**

In the absence of documentary evidence, or in the light of indirect testimony (foreign records) the accuracy with which we can determine gender roles and indeed the sex of inhumed remains in extinct nonliterate cultures is a highly variable factor. To a considerable degree, culturally-biased assumption has coloured our past conclusions, often conflicting with anthropometric analysis. Refinement in anthropometric and genetic technique now offers the highest-yet probability of correctly sexing physical remains and the increased confidence of these results tends to counterbalance remaining cultural bias factors. The revolution in social consciousness surrounding the women’s movement of the late twentieth
century has likewise fostered an environment in which chauvinistic bias in gender-ascription is more easily recognised, and more comfortably dismissed.

Long-standing assumptions concerning the normative gender behaviour of some ancient non-literate cultures may be substantially refuted in favour of a more gender-egalitarian model, supported by the proliferation of female high-status burials now known from the 1st millennium BC. The range over which gender-equality, recognised in relative access to social roles (political, religious, military etc.) for men and women, really extended in such cultures cannot yet be determined, but the need for reevaluation of sex/role demography amongst the cultures of “barbarian” Europe is strongly indicated, as these peoples perhaps more than any other may have been affected by the assumptive bias of past investigators, and with the least remedial work performed to date. The caution may be recognised that normative conditions of gender roles deriving from the Classical Mediterranean cultural sphere should be strictly partitioned from other streams of cultural descent, as cross-application generates biased and therefore flawed models.

In the parallel question of whether horsemanship fostered gender-egalitarian society, the cautious conclusion can be reached that the relationship is conditionally consequential. The addition of horsemanship to a culture in which gender-equality already existed, even if in only limited form, likely served to mature and concrete that equality by doubling the mobile presence of the society, whether in terms of stock herding, hunting or warfare; while the addition of horsemanship to a society in which women were already denied access to power or independent action had little or no real impact on gender roles whatsoever.


Recommendations for Further Work:

The likelihood of Celtic or Steppe culture materials in sufficiently pristine condition as to allow meaningful genetic investigations coming to light is extremely remote. A more practical investigation concerns the systematic reinterpretation of stored mortuary collections from regions affected by the past practice of indirect sexing by grave good association, and limited direct sexing by vague or obsolete techniques. This reworking, concerning Celts and other European peoples, will provide a far more reliable sex-role distribution demograph, and the collective corpus of fresh data may provide the basis for a refined model of social structures within these peoples. Unfortunately, as with the Steppe Cultures, much of the skeletal material on which basic models were erected probably no longer exists, thus it is vitally important that the proposed methodology be applied to mortuary populations coming available from future excavations.

Where Celtic materials do exist, detailed pathological investigation for stress fractures, calcification and other features associated with life activities should yield useful data. In the question of whether women served in the warrior role, investigation for forearm stress fractures (from use of swords), shoulder calcification (spear and shield) and (perhaps) hip/thigh deformation or other musculoskeletal markers (riding) would provide data which may be readily cross-matched with the results of existing osteological studies into other populations, e.g., the mortuary population at Aymyrlyg, Siberia (Murphy, 1998).
Note: Some references, especially those obtained online, are incomplete, reproducing errors or omissions inherent to online publishing as they were consistently incomplete from site to site. In other instances, such as the cataloguing-in-publication data provided by useful, richly-illustrated, if nonacademic, presses such as Time-Life, references are also marginally incomplete at a properly academic level.


Davis-Kimball, J. (2001) Statuses of Sauromatian and Sarmatian Women
http://csen.org/Statuses of Women Warriors


Justin: A Roman description of the Parthians or later Persians, from Justin's *History of the World, XLI:III*), http://www.shsu.edu/~his_ncp/Parthian.html


