

# War and Gender

*How Gender Shapes the War System  
and Vice Versa*

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# 1 A puzzle: the cross-cultural consistency of gender roles in war

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## INTRODUCTION

Recently, the roles of women in war have received increased attention in both scholarship and political debate. US moms went off to battle in the 1991 Gulf War, to a global audience. Since then, women have crept slowly closer to combat roles in Western militaries. Meanwhile, women were primary targets of massacres in wars in Rwanda, Burundi, Algeria, Bosnia, southern Mexico, and elsewhere. The systematic use of rape in warfare was defined as a war crime for the first time by the international tribunal for the former Yugoslavia.

Despite this growing attention to *women* in war, however, and a surge of recent scholarship in relevant fields, no comprehensive account has yet emerged on the role of *gender* in war – a topic that includes both men and women but ultimately revolves around men somewhat more than women. This book brings together knowledge from a half dozen academic disciplines to trace the main ways in which gender shapes war and war shapes gender.

The evidence presented here is complex and detailed, forming more of a mosaic than an abstract painting. A single case rarely makes or breaks a hypothesis, but many together often can. Only by assembling large bodies of empirical evidence from multiple disciplines can we assess the meaning of a single event or result in the context of the overall picture. A central challenge to bringing together relevant knowledge about war and gender in this comprehensive way is that the topic spans multiple *levels of analysis*. That is, relevant processes operate in a range of contexts varying in size, scope, and speed – from physiology to individual behavior, social institutions, states, the international system, and global trends. As a result, understanding war and gender requires operating across such disciplines as biochemistry, anthropology, psychology, sociology, political science, and history. One aspect of this challenge is that different research communities use terminology differently. I try to clarify, without over-translating, disciplinary languages.

**“Sex” and “gender”** Many scholars use the terms “sex” and “gender” in a way that I find unworkable: “sex” refers to what is biological, and “gender” to what is cultural. We *are* a certain sex but we *learn* or *perform* certain gender roles which are not predetermined or tied rigidly to biological sex. Thus, sex is fixed and based in nature; gender is arbitrary, flexible, and based in culture. This usage helps to detach gender inequalities from any putative inherent or natural basis. The problem, however, is that this sex–gender discourse constructs a false dichotomy between biology and culture, which are in fact highly interdependent.<sup>1</sup>

More concretely, the conception of biology as fixed and culture as flexible is wrong (see pp. 251–52). Biology provides diverse potentials, and cultures limit, select, and channel them. Furthermore, culture directly influences the expression of genes and hence the biology of our bodies. No universal biological essence of “sex” exists, but rather a complex system of potentials that are activated by various internal *and* external influences. I see no useful border separating “sex” and “gender” as conventionally used.

I therefore use “gender” to cover masculine and feminine roles and bodies alike, in all their aspects, including the (biological and cultural) structures, dynamics, roles, and scripts associated with each gender group. I reserve the word “sex” for sexual behaviors (recognizing that there is no precise dividing line here either). However, I retain the term “sexism” which is in common usage, and retain original terms such as “sex role” when quoting.

By *patriarchy* (literally, rule by fathers), I mean social organization based on men’s control of power. *Masculinism(ist)* refers to an ideology justifying, promoting, or advocating male domination. *Feminism* – my own ideological preference – opposes male superiority, and promotes women’s interests and gender equality.

**“War”** “War” and the “war system” also need clarification. According to some scholars’ definitions of war, it is impossible for small-scale simple societies – such as prehistoric or modern gathering-hunting cultures – to have war. Some military historians argue that only organized, large-scale pitched battles are *real* war. A common definition used in political science counts only wars producing 1,000 battle fatalities. Obviously, only an agricultural, complex society can muster such a large-scale force. Yet many anthropologists (not all) consider warfare to exist in smaller and less complex societies, including gathering-hunting societies. (The term “gathering-hunting” is preferable to the familiar “hunting-gathering”

<sup>1</sup> Tuana 1983, 625; James 1997, 214; Oudshoorn 1994; Laqueur 1990, 8.

since gathering typically provides the majority of nutrition in these societies.)

I define war broadly, as *lethal intergroup violence*. If members of a small gathering-hunting society go out in an organized group to kill members of another community, I call that war. Indeed, warfare worldwide in recent years seldom has taken the form of pitched battles between state armies. A very broad definition such as “organized violence” has advantages, and still excludes individual acts of violence that are not socially sanctioned and organized. However, “organized violence” is not quite specific enough, since it would include, for example, the death penalty. The difference is that wars occur between groups (communities, ethnic groups, societies, states). Wars also cross an important threshold by killing people. Not all intergroup violence has this lethal quality. By my definition, some urban gang violence (sustained, territorial, lethal) is a form of war, though on a scale closer to gathering-hunting societies than to modern states.<sup>2</sup>

I define the *war system* as the interrelated ways that societies organize themselves to participate in potential and actual wars. In this perspective, war is less a series of events than a system with continuity through time. This system includes, for example, military spending and attitudes about war, in addition to standing military forces and actual fighting.

In understanding gendered war roles, the *potential* for war matters more than the outbreak of particular wars. As Hobbes put it, war “consisteth not in actual fighting; but in the known disposition thereto during all the time there is no assurance to the contrary.” Kant similarly distinguished between peace as it had been known in modern Europe through the eighteenth century – merely a lull or cease-fire – and what he called “permanent peace.” From 1815 to 1914, great-power wars largely disappeared, and some people thought warfare itself was withering away. But when conditions changed, the latent potential for warfare in the great-power system emerged again, with a vengeance, in the twentieth century. Thus, like a patient with cancer in remission, a society that is only temporarily peaceful still lives under the shadow of war.<sup>3</sup>

## Plan of the book

Chapter 1 describes a puzzle: despite the diversity of gender and of war separately, gender roles in war are very consistent across all known human societies. Furthermore, virtually all human cultures to date have faced the possibility, and frequently the actual experience, of war (although

<sup>2</sup> Forsberg 1997a, 17; Carneiro 1994, 6; Reyna 1994, 30; Ferguson 1984, 5.

<sup>3</sup> Hobbes in Taylor 1976, 131; Kant 1795; Forsberg 1997b.

Table 1.1 *Summary of hypotheses*


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The consistency of gendered war roles across cultures might be explained by:

1. Gender-linked war roles are not in fact cross-culturally consistent
  2. Sexist discrimination despite women's historical success as combatants:
    - (A) In female combat units
    - (B) In mixed-gender units
    - (C) As individual women fighters
    - (D) As women military leaders
  3. Gender differences in anatomy and physiology
    - (A) Genetics
    - (B) Testosterone levels
    - (C) Size and strength
    - (D) Brains and cognition
    - (E) Female sex hormones
  4. Innate gender differences in group dynamics
    - (A) Male bonding
    - (B) Ability to work in hierarchies
    - (C) In-group/out-group psychology
    - (D) Childhood gender segregation
  5. Cultural construction of tough men and tender women
    - (A) Test of manhood as a motivation to fight
    - (B) Feminine reinforcement of soldiers' masculinity
    - (C) Women's peace activism
  6. Men's sexual and economic domination of women
    - (A) Male sexuality as a cause of aggression
    - (B) Feminization of enemies as symbolic domination
    - (C) Dependence on exploiting women's labor
- 
- 

Note: Hypothesis numbers match chapter numbers in this book. Summary assessment of evidence is in Table 7.1 (pp. 404–5).

I do not think this generalization will last far into the future). In every known case, past and present, cultures have met this challenge in a gender-based way, by assembling groups of fighters who were primarily, and usually exclusively, male. The empirical evidence for these generalizations, reviewed in the chapter, shows the scope and depth of the puzzle. The chapter then reviews three strands of feminist theory that offer a variety of possible answers to the puzzle. From these approaches, I extract 20 hypotheses amenable to assessment based on empirical evidence (see Table 1.1). The results fill chapters 2–6. All three feminist approaches

turn out to contribute in different ways to understanding the puzzle of gendered war roles.

Chapter 2 considers the numerous historical cases in which women for various reasons participated in military operations including combat. This historical record shows that women are capable of performing successfully in war. Thus, the near-total exclusion of women from combat roles does not seem to be explained by women's inherent lack of ability. This evidence deepens the puzzle of gendered war roles. Many societies have lived by war or perished by war, but very few have mobilized women to fight. Why?

Chapter 3 tests five explanations for the gendering of war based on gender differences in individual biology: (1) men's genes program them for violence; (2) testosterone makes men more aggressive than women; (3) men are bigger and stronger than women; (4) men's brains are adapted for long-distance mobility and for aggression; and (5) women are biologically adapted for caregiving roles that preclude participation in war. Each of these hypotheses except genetics finds *some* support from empirical evidence, but only in terms of average differences between genders, not the categorical divisions that mark gendered war roles.

Chapter 4 explores dynamics within and between groups, drawing on animal behavior and human psychology. Several potential explanations come from this perspective: (1) "male bonding" is important to the conduct of war; (2) men operate better than women in hierarchies, including armies; (3) men see intergroup relations, as between the two sides in a war, differently from women; and (4) childhood gender segregation leads to later segregation in combat forces. The strongest empirical evidence emerges for childhood segregation, but that segregation does not explain the nearly total exclusion of women as combatants.

Chapter 5 discusses how constructions of masculinity motivate soldiers to fight, across a variety of cultures and belief systems. Norms of masculinity contribute to men's exclusive status as warriors, and preparation for war is frequently a central component of masculinity. I explore several aspects: (1) war becomes a "test of manhood," helping overcome men's natural aversion to participating in combat, and cultures mold hardened men suitable for this test by toughening up young boys; (2) masculine war roles depend on feminine roles in the war system, including mothers, wives, and sweethearts; and (3) women actively oppose wars. The last two of these contradict each other, but I argue that even women peace activists can reinforce masculine war roles (by feminizing peace and thus masculinizing war), creating a dilemma for the women's peace movement. Overall, masculinity does contribute to motivating soldiers' participation

in war, and might do so less effectively with women present in the ranks.

Chapter 6 asks whether, beyond their identities as tough men who can endure hardship, soldiers are also motivated by less heroic qualities. Misogyny and domination of women, according to some feminists, underlie male soldiers' participation in war (thus explaining women's rare participation as combatants). The chapter explores several diverse possibilities: (1) men's sexual energies play a role in aggression; (2) women symbolize for male soldiers a dominated group and thus cannot be included in the armed ranks of dominators; and (3) women's labor is exploited more in wartime than in peace, so patriarchal societies keep women in civilian positions. Chapter 6 explores both the men's roles in these dynamics, and the corresponding women's roles as prostitutes, victims, war support workers, and replacement labor for men at war.

Chapter 7 concludes that the gendering of war appears to result from a combination of factors, with two main causes finding robust empirical support: (1) small, innate biological gender differences in *average* size, strength, and roughness; and (2) cultural molding of tough, brave men, who feminize enemies in dominating them. The gendering of war thus results from the combination of culturally constructed gender roles with real but modest biological differences. Neither alone would solve the puzzle.

Causality runs both ways between war and gender. Gender roles adapt individuals for war roles, and war roles provide the context within which individuals are socialized into gender roles. For the war system to change fundamentally, or for war to end, might require profound changes in gender relations. But the transformation of gender roles may depend on deep changes in the war system. Multiple pathways of causality and feedback loops are common in biology, acting as stabilizing mechanisms in a dynamic system, and come to the fore at several points in this book. Although I focus mainly on gender's effects on war, the reverse causality proves surprisingly strong. The socialization of children into gender roles helps reproduce the war system. War shadows every gendered relationship, and affects families, couples, and individuals in surprising ways.

## **The diversity of war and of gender**

The cross-cultural consistency of gendered war roles, which this chapter will explore, is set against a backdrop of great diversity of cultural forms of both war and gender roles considered separately.

Apart from war and a few biological necessities (gestation and lactation), gender roles show great diversity across cultures and through history. Human beings have created many forms of marriage, sexuality, and division of labor in household work and child care. Marriage patterns differ widely across cultures. Some societies practice monogamy and some polygamy (and some preach monogamy but practice nonmonogamy). Of the polygamous cultures, most are predominantly polygynous (one man, several wives) but some are predominantly polyandrous (one woman, several husbands). Regarding ownership of property and lines of descent, a majority of societies are patrilineal; women move to their husbands' households. A substantial number are matrilineal, however, with husbands moving to their wives' households. Most societies are patrilineal – tracing descent (and passing property) on the father's side – but more than a few are matrilineal. Norms regarding sexuality also vary greatly across cultures. Some societies are puritanical, others open about sex. Some work hard to enforce fidelity – for example, by condoning killings of adulterers – whereas others accept multiple sexual relationships as normal. Attitudes towards homosexuality also differ across time and place, from relative acceptance to intolerance. Today, some countries officially prohibit discrimination against gay men and lesbians, while other countries officially punish homosexuality with death.

Gender roles also vary across cultures when it comes to household and child care responsibilities. Different societies divide economic work differently by gender (except hunting). Political leadership, while never dominated by women and often dominated by men, shows a range of possibilities in different cultures, from near-exclusion to near-equality for women. Even child care (except pregnancy and nursing) shows considerable variation in the roles assigned to men and women. The areas where gender roles tend to be most constant across societies – political leadership, hunting, and certain coming-of-age rituals – are those most closely connected with war. Thus, overall, gender roles *outside* war vary greatly.

Similarly, forms of war vary greatly, except for their gendered character. Different cultures fight in very different ways. The Aztecs overpowered and captured warriors from neighboring societies, then used them for torture, human sacrifice, and food. A central rack contained over 100,000 skulls of their victims. The Dahomey also warred for captives, but to sell into slavery to European traders. The Yanomamö declare that their wars are about the capture of women. The ancient Chinese states of the warring-states period sought to conquer their neighbors' territories and populations intact in order to augment their own power.

For the Mundurucú of Brazil, the word for enemy referred to any non-Mundurucú group, and war had no apparent instrumental purpose beyond being an “unquestioned part of their way of life.” The civil war in Lebanon had “no clear causes, no stable enemy . . . The chaos penetrated every aspect of daily life so that everyone participated always.”<sup>4</sup>

Some wars more than pay for themselves; others are economic disasters. The economic benefit of cheap oil was arguably greater than the cost of the Gulf War, for Western powers that chipped in to pay for the war. Similarly, the nomadic peoples of the Eurasian steppes who invented warfare on horseback found profit in raiding. But the Vietnam War bankrupted the “Great Society” in the United States, and incessant wars between France and Spain drove both into bankruptcy in 1557. The Thirty Years War so devastated central Europe’s economy that the mercenary soldier was described as “a man who had to die so as to have something to live on.”<sup>5</sup>

Some wars seem almost symbolic because they absorb great effort but produce few casualties. Among the Dani of New Guinea, formalistic battles across set front lines – fought with spears, sticks, and bow and arrows – lasted from midmorning until nightfall or rain, with a rest period at midday, and with noncombatants watching from the sidelines. A different form of ritualistic war occupied the two superpowers of the Cold War era, whose nuclear weapons were built, deployed, and maintained on alert, but never used. Other wars, such as the Napoleonic Wars, the US Civil War, and the World Wars, were all-too-real spectacles of pain and misery that defy comprehension. A quarter of the Aztecs’ central skull rack could be filled by a single day’s deaths, 26,000 people, at the battle of Antietam.<sup>6</sup>

Some wars take place far from home, when armies travel on expeditions to distant lands. In the Crusades, European armies pillaged Muslim and Jewish communities for the glory of a Christian God. Later, European armies occupied colonies worldwide. Americans fought in the World Wars “over there” (Europe). Cuban soldiers in the 1980s fought in Angola. For traveling soldiers, home was a long way away, and for their home societies, war was distant. For most European peasants of the sixteenth century, war seldom impinged on daily life except through taxation. Other wars, however, hit extremely close to home. In recent decades, civil wars often

<sup>4</sup> Aztecs: Hassig 1988; Keegan 1993, 108–14; Harris 1977, skulls 159; women: Chagnon 1996; Durbin and Bowlby 1939, 114; Chinese: Sun Tzu 1963; Brazil: Murphy 1957, 1025; Lebanon: Cooke 1987, 164.

<sup>5</sup> Howard 1976, mercenary 37.

<sup>6</sup> Dani: Ember and Ember 1990, 406; cf. Maring: Harris 1974, 64; Civil: Keegan and Holmes 1985, 141–43.

have put civilians and everyday life right in the firing line. The World Wars made entire societies into war machines and therefore into targets. In such cases the “home front” and the “war front” become intimately connected.

Sometimes soldiers kill enemies that they have never met, who look different from them and speak languages they do not understand. The Incas of Peru assumed the incomprehensible Spanish invaders to be gods. By contrast, in some wars neighbors kill neighbors, as in the 1992 Serbian campaign of terror in Bosnia. Soldiers sometimes kill at great distances, as with over-the-horizon air and ship missiles. At other times, they kill at close quarters, as with bayonets. Some, like the soldiers who planted land mines in Cambodia and Angola in the 1980s, have no idea whom they killed. Others, such as snipers in any war, can see exactly whom they kill.

Combatants react in many different ways. Many soldiers in battle lose the ability to function, because of psychological trauma. But some soldiers feel energized in battle, and some look back to their military service as the best time of their lives. They found meaning, community, and the thrill of surviving danger. In many societies, veterans of battle receive special status and privilege afterwards. Sometimes, however, returning soldiers are treated as pariahs. Some soldiers fight with dogged determination, and willingly die and kill when they could have run away. In other cases, entire armies simply crumble because they lack a will to fight, as happened to the well-armed government forces in Africa’s third largest country, Zaire (Democratic Congo), in 1997.

**The puzzle** War, then, is a tremendously diverse enterprise, operating in many contexts with many purposes, rules, and meanings. Gender norms outside war show similar diversity. The puzzle, which this chapter fleshes out and the remaining chapters try to answer, is why this diversity disappears when it comes to the *connection* of war with gender. That connection is more stable, across cultures and through time, than are either gender roles outside of war or the forms and frequency of war itself.

The answer in a nutshell is that killing in war does not come naturally for either gender, yet the potential for war has been universal in human societies. To help overcome soldiers’ reluctance to fight, cultures develop gender roles that equate “manhood” with toughness under fire. Across cultures and through time, the selection of men as potential combatants (and of women for feminine war support roles) has helped shape the war system. In turn, the pervasiveness of war in history has influenced gender profoundly – especially gender norms in child-rearing.

**Hypothesis 1.** Gender-linked war roles are not in fact cross-culturally consistent.

The cross-cultural consistency of gendered war roles could be explained by various hypotheses, but the first task is to establish whether this consistency actually exists, and if so how strong it is. Is it contradicted by supposed counter-examples, such as ancient Amazons or matriarchal gathering-hunting societies? Universal generalizations often silence the voices of those whose experiences do not fit. To seek out those voices, to look at the outliers, can reveal important information. Thus, I tried to track down any report of a human society in which gender roles in war were significantly equalized or reversed, or where war was absent altogether (and therefore gender-linked war roles could not exist). Very few held up under scrutiny.

#### A. THE UNIVERSAL GENDERING OF WAR

In war, the fighters are usually all male. Exceptions to this rule are numerous and quite informative (see pp. 59–127), but these exceptions together amount to far fewer than 1 percent of all warriors in history. As interesting as that fragment of the picture may be – and it is – the uniformity of gender in war-fighters is still striking.<sup>7</sup>

Within this uniformity, some diversity occurs. For one thing, women's war roles vary considerably from culture to culture, including roles as support troops, psychological war-boosters, peacemakers, and so forth. Although men's war roles show less cross-cultural diversity, societies do construct norms of masculinity around war in a variety of ways (see pp. 251–380). Nonetheless, these variations occur within a uniform pattern that links men with war-fighting in every society that fights wars.

In the present interstate system, the gendering of war is stark. About 23 million soldiers serve in today's uniformed standing armies, of whom about 97 percent are male (somewhat over 500,000 are women). In only six of the world's nearly 200 states do women make up more than 5 percent of the armed forces. And most of these women in military forces worldwide occupy traditional women's roles such as typists and nurses (see pp. 83–87; 102–5). Designated *combat* forces in the world's state armies today include several million soldiers (the exact number depending on definitions of combat), of whom 99.9 percent are male. In 1993, 168 women belonged to the ground combat units of Canada, Netherlands, Denmark, and Norway combined, with none in Russia, Britain,

<sup>7</sup> Ehrenreich 1997a, 125; Tiger 1969, 104; Van Creveld 1993, 5.

Germany, France, and Israel. Change since 1993, although not trivial, has been incremental. In UN peacekeeping forces, women (mostly nurses) made up less than 0.1 percent in 1957–89 and still less than 2 percent when UN peacekeeping peaked in the early 1990s.<sup>8</sup>

These data reflect a time period in which women had reached their highest social and political power to date, and in which the world's predominant military force (the United States) was carrying out the largest-scale military gender integration in history (see pp. 93–105). Despite these momentous changes, combat forces today almost totally exclude women, and the entire global military system has so few women and such limited roles for them as to make many of its most important settings all-male.

Did these rigid gender divisions in today's state military forces occur in other times and places, or are they by-products of specific contexts and processes embodied in today's states? I will show, in this section, that war is gendered across virtually all human societies and therefore did not "acquire" gender, so to speak, as a result of state formation, capitalism, Western civilization, or other such influences.

### **Myths of Amazon matriarchies**

The strongest evidence against universalizing today's gender divisions in war would be to show counter-examples from other times and places, especially female armies (Amazons). What would happen if an entire army were organized primarily using women? How would a society fare if its fighters were mostly, or entirely, female? We do not know, because no evidence shows that anyone has ever tried it. Ancient historians reported that Amazons had once existed, but no longer did. A few modern historians agreed, but despite much effort, no hard evidence has emerged showing that anything close to the mythical Amazon society ever existed.<sup>9</sup>

The Amazons of Greek myth not only participated in fighting and controlled politics, but exclusively made up both the population and the fighting force. They supposedly lived in the area north of the Black Sea about 700 years before the fifth century BC when the historian Herodotus reports hearing stories about them. According to myth, the Amazons were an all-female society of fierce warriors who got pregnant by neighboring societies' men and then practiced male infanticide (or sent male babies away). Supposedly they cut off one breast to make shooting a bow and arrow easier, although most artistic renditions do not show this. (The

<sup>8</sup> United Nations Women 1995; Segal and Segal 1993; Presidential Commission 1993, ground C31.

<sup>9</sup> Eller 2000; few: Anderson 1967, 75; De Pauw 1998, 43–48; Kanter 1926, 32; Boulding 1992/I, 218–19; Alpern 1998, 7.



Figure 1.1 Battle of Greeks and Amazons (sarcophagus). [Alinari/Art Resource, NY.]

word “Amazon” is no longer thought to derive from “without breast” although the word may have some connection with breasts.) Amazons are an important theme in Greek art, and – in various forms – in subsequent cultural currents throughout history. Greek, Hellenistic, and Roman art incorporated battles with Amazons on a regular basis (see Figure 1.1), including a scene engraved on the west side of the Parthenon.

The mythical Amazons had their capital in Themiscyra, and were ruled by a series of queens. The Greek hero Heracles, as one of a series of quests, had to capture the sacred girdle of the Amazon queen, Antiope. His army defeated the Amazons and captured the queen’s sister, Hippolyta, whom the Athenian king Theseus married. Later, the Amazons retaliated by attacking Athens with a large army, possibly including allied Scythians (who also lived north of the Black Sea). The months-long battle caused high casualties on both sides, but ultimately the Greeks prevailed. In some accounts, the Amazons also fought against the Greeks in the Trojan War. Some ancient manuscripts added a verse to *The Iliad* saying that the Amazons under Queen Penthesilea arrived to support the Trojans.<sup>10</sup>

Herodotus reports that after the Greek victory at Themiscyra, the Greeks took three ships full of captured Amazons back towards Athens, but the Amazons overpowered the Greeks and (not knowing navigation)

<sup>10</sup> Seymour 1965, Trojan 628.

drifted ashore in Scythian territory. Finding some wild horses inland, they began riding off in search of loot and found themselves battling the Scythians, who were amazed to find afterwards that the Amazons had been women. The Scythians then courted the Amazons, to produce children by such amazing women. (As fellow hunters and plunderers the Scythians were a good match for the Amazons.) This interbreeding succeeded, but the Amazons refused to settle down (relatively speaking) with the Scythians, where women “stay at home in their wagons occupied with feminine tasks” (Herodotus). Instead they invited their new husbands to go off with them to a new place, and that is how the Sauromatian people are supposed to have originated. For Herodotus, this account explained why Sauromatian women go “riding to the hunt on horseback sometimes with, sometimes without their menfolk, taking part in war, and wearing the same sort of clothes as men” and why they “have a marriage law which forbids a girl to marry until she has killed an enemy in battle.”<sup>11</sup>

The stories Herodotus heard about the Sauromatians may have been exaggerated, but some archaeological evidence from the early Iron Age indicates that nomadic women in the region of the Eurasian steppes – especially near modern-day northern Kazakhstan – rode horses, may have used weapons, and may even have had some degree of political influence, though probably not dominance, in their society. Jeannine Davis-Kimball recently reported that excavations at a Sauromatian site (fourth century BC to second century AD) near the Russia–Kazakhstan border “suggest that Greek tales of Amazon warriors may have had some basis in fact.” Actually, as Davis-Kimball notes, archaeologists in the 1950s had already discovered “that many graves of females contained swords, spears, daggers, arrowheads, and armor” in fourth-century BC graves of nomads in southern Ukraine. These sites would have been much closer to the supposed Amazons that fascinated the Greeks (though still to the east of them). Davis-Kimball’s site is 1,000 miles to the east, so her Sauromatians “cannot have been the same people” as the Amazons.<sup>12</sup>

In Davis-Kimball’s sites, seven graves of females were found with “iron swords or daggers, bronze arrowheads, and whetstones to sharpen the weapons, suggesting that these seven females were warriors.” One young girl’s bowed legs “attest to a life on horseback” and “she wore a bronze arrowhead in a leather pouch around her neck.” Another woman’s body contained a bent arrowhead, “suggesting that she had been killed in battle.” (I would note that women killed in war might not be combatants.) Since females generally “were buried with a wider variety and larger quantity of artifacts than males,” Davis-Kimball concludes that “females . . .

<sup>11</sup> In Kleinbaum 1983, 7–8.

<sup>12</sup> Davis-Kimball 1997, suggest 45, armor 8, same 48.

seem to have controlled much of the wealth.” This seems doubtful, however. Using a variety of objects hardly implies control of wealth.<sup>13</sup>

Despite the hype about Amazons, Davis-Kimball never suggests that women were the main warriors in this society, but merely that they may have taken to arms to defend their relatives and animals when attacked. Indeed, 40 of the 44 males buried at the site appeared to be warriors, while four males appeared to be other than warriors. But only seven females may have been warriors compared to 28 female graves containing “artifacts typically associated with femininity and domesticity,” and five females who may have been priestesses (graves with altars and ritual objects). If these graves represent a fair sample, something like 90 percent of the men, but only 15–20 percent of the women, took part in war. It is an important case since these percentages of women participation are high, but it is not a case of the majority of women being warriors, or the majority of warriors being women, by far. Furthermore, women buried with horses and spears may indicate that some women fought, at least at times, but does not show that women predominated either in military or political life. The fact that Amazons have not been dug up does not *disprove* their existence, of course. But absent any real empirical evidence of a matriarchal society of women warriors, the burden of proof is on showing it did exist, not that it could never have existed.<sup>14</sup>

**The puzzling question of horses** The nomadic equestrian warriors of the steppes helped shape warfare along its historical lines. Horses later provided the decisive military advantage in various historical contexts including ancient Eurasian civilizations, the rise of West African kingdoms, and the conquest of the New World. “[T]he most important new weapon of the Bronze Age, the war chariot,” appeared in Mesopotamia after 3000 BC and a thousand years later in Egypt. After 2000 BC “the horse-drawn, spoked, war chariot was the elite striking arm of ancient armies.” Domesticated horses quickly spread through the Middle East and Europe. The horses were “not ridden but harnessed to chariots.” The invention of the composite bow made of wood, gut, and bone – which could reach 250 yards – made the war chariot a powerful weapon. But chariots remained “extremely expensive to establish and maintain” owing to “complex logistics” of horse-breeding, chariot-building, metal smiths, support teams, and riders. The chariot was thus available only to rich kingdoms – suitable for a “heroic mode” of fighting by kings, or by high-priced mercenary charioteers. It was typically used

<sup>13</sup> Davis-Kimball 1997, 47–48; Kleinbaum 1983, 8.

<sup>14</sup> Hype: Wilford 1997a; Perlman 1997; Sawyer 1997; Davis-Kimball 1997, artifacts 47; Taylor 1996, 199–205; Fraser 1989, furthermore 18–19.

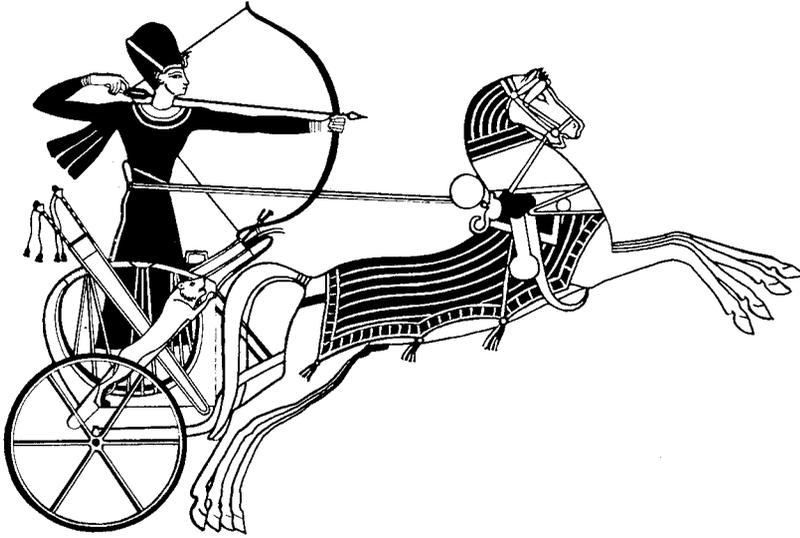


Figure 1.2 Ramses on war chariot, c. 1285 BC. [© Thames & Hudson Ltd, London. From *The Origins of War* by Arther Ferrill, published by Thames & Hudson Inc, New York.]

at the critical moment of a battle, to break enemy infantry ranks, and then for “turning defeat to rout.”<sup>15</sup>

Women ride horses as well as men do. This is clear from the Olympic Games’ gender integration of equestrian events, in contrast to the other events. The Iron Age steppes women warriors and the mythical Amazons share the element of raiding on horseback. If women participated in war in ancient nomadic steppe societies, they were in some sense present at the creation of civilizational war, yet they disappeared from cavalry as larger-scale military units formed and empires arose. This seems puzzling. For example, Ramses II in his war chariot at the thirteenth-century BC battle of Kadesh (Figure 1.2) cuts a rather femme figure by today’s norms of manly warriorhood. Yet his army was equal to the best in its time, and successfully expanded Egypt’s territorial borders. The successful deployment of such a chariot would seem to depend on (1) skill in controlling the horse and (2) accuracy, more than sheer strength, in shooting arrows. It is hard to see why all women would be unqualified in such skills. Given the limited number of war chariots (an expensive item), an empire would presumably succeed best by allocating chariots to the very best, most skilled individuals regardless of gender. Down through

<sup>15</sup> Keegan 1993, 136; Barfield 1994; Diamond 1997, 74–77, 91, 164, 358; Sanday 1981, 146; Ferrill 1985, most-arm 40; Watkins 1989, heroic 28, rout 31.



Figure 1.3 South American Amazon cannibals, from Hulsius, *Voyages*. [Rare Books Division, New York Public Library; Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.]

history, one might have expected cavalry to be a point of entry for women into fighting forces, but this did not occur. The question of horses is an intriguing but unanswered aspect of the puzzle of gendered war roles.

**South American Amazons** As with ancient Greece, little evidence exists for Amazons in South America, although European explorers believed that such societies existed (see Figure 1.3). Friar Gaspar de Carvajal in 1542 claimed to have witnessed and participated in fighting with women warriors (leading the men), at one point on the Orellana expedition down the Amazon river. Contemporary skeptics in Europe called Carvajal's account either a fabrication or a fever-induced mirage.<sup>16</sup>

Spanish conquerors in the northern Andes and eastern Venezuela alluded frequently to women who accompanied warriors and sometimes also fought. These reports, however, reflect an uncertain mix of actual observations, inferences based on native women's transvestitism, and local legends passed along. Reports of women fighters rest on Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, and the Inca culture. Unfortunately, all these cases

<sup>16</sup> Henderson and Henderson 1978, mirage xiii.

come from Spanish conquerors' centuries-old accounts of cultures they conquered (cultures the Spaniards wanted to portray as barbaric), and are thus hard to evaluate. In any event, except for Carvajal's account, these reports claimed only that women participated in fighting, not that they were the main fighters.<sup>17</sup>

Some specific claims about South American Amazons are easy to refute. For example, the *Encyclopedia of Amazons* states: "The anthropologists Yolanda and Robert Murphy found that even today Brazilian tribal women live apart from men 'in convivial sisterhood.' Their authority exceeds that of men in all practical matters." What Murphy and Murphy actually describe is a highly sexist society in which women's sisterhood arises from their common terrorization by the men. "The superior status of the male is manifest in the rituals of everyday life." Women until menopause "sit in the rear, walk in the rear of a file, and eat after the men do." Women who are considered sexually "loose" are punished by gang rape by twenty or more men, as are women who peek at the men's sacred musical instruments. "[T]he men consciously state that they use the penis to dominate their women."<sup>18</sup>

**Purposes of Amazon myths** The Greek Amazons – always imagined as somewhere outside the civilizing sphere of Greek conquest – represented a symbolic place for Greek heroes to subdue the barbarians on their periphery. So did the South American Amazons for Spain. Similarly, Virgil marked the establishment of the Roman empire with a story about the defeat of the Italian man-killing warrior Camilla, of great beauty and nearly supernatural power. These mythical women warrior societies represent a foreign, topsy-turvy world. Representing women in this way reinforced men's construction of their own patriarchal societies as orderly and natural.<sup>19</sup>

Although some lesbians and radical feminists embrace Amazon myths, the various representations of Amazons through history have carried a mixed message because men use those myths to reinforce their own masculinity. Abby Kleinbaum writes: "As surely as no spider's web was built for the glorification of flies, the Amazon idea was not designed to enhance women." For example, Katharine Hepburn's first major role, as Antiope in the 1931 Broadway play *The Warrior's Husband* (see Figure 1.4), was remembered by reviewers as the play in which she "first bared her lovely legs." Television's "Xena: Warrior Princess" is sometimes invoked as a

<sup>17</sup> Steward and Faron 1959, 190, 209, 223, 245; Dransart 1987, 62, 65; Shoumatoff 1986, 13, 36, 44.

<sup>18</sup> Salmonson 1991, 96–97; Murphy and Murphy 1985, 130–33.

<sup>19</sup> Fraser 1989, 19–22; Enloe 1983, 117–18; Kleinbaum 1983; Kanter 1926; Bennett 1967; DuBois 1982; Tyrrell 1984; Salmonson 1991; Wilford 1997a; Alpern 1998, 8; Macdonald 1987a, 8; Macdonald 1987b; Kirk 1987; Dransart 1987.



Figure 1.4 Katherine Hepburn as Antiope in *The Warrior's Husband*, 1932. [Billy Rose Theatre Collection, the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts; Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations. Photograph: White Studio.]

pro-feminist symbol of power – Madeleine Albright jokingly called her “one of my role models” in 1998 – but also contains an anti-feminist undertow. A male interviewer of Xena actress Lucy Lawless (who describes herself as “a woman’s woman”) writes, “As Xena, the tall, strong, athletic beauty with gloriously blue eyes is togged out in boots, a leather miniskirt and metal breastplates that do her breathtaking body no harm at all.” This mix of sex-object and power figure recurs in the Amazon genre.<sup>20</sup>

Most recently, the gunslinging British digital-character “Lara Croft” on Sony’s Playstation continues this ambiguous tradition. Of the 25,000 World Wide Web sites that mention Croft (as of 1999), over half also contained the term “nude.” Croft’s corporate spokesperson said, “A lot of people who play video games fantasize about her. She’s not overtly sexual. OK, she is physically sexual, but she has a personality.” The design of Croft’s cyberbody, like the costumes worn by actresses such as Hepburn and Lawless with their bare legs and accentuated breasts, seems geared more to male viewers than feminists.<sup>21</sup>

In summary, Amazons provide interesting material for the analysis of culture and myth in sexist societies, but little historical evidence for the participation of women in war. As far as available evidence goes, no society exclusively populated or controlled by women, nor one in which women were the primary fighters, has ever existed.

### **Gendered war roles in preindustrial societies**

In present-day gathering-hunting and agrarian societies, it is common to have special gender taboos regarding weapons, and special cultural practices focused on men’s roles as warriors. In many gathering-hunting cultures, gender roles in war connect with gender roles in hunting. Sometimes war and hunting are the only two spheres of social life that exclude women, or the two spheres where that exclusion is most formalized. Taboos govern whether, and if so when and how, women may touch weapons used in hunting as well as those for war.<sup>22</sup>

The gendering of war is similar across war-prone and more peaceful societies, as well as across very sexist and relatively gender-equal societies. Consider two societies that occupy extreme positions regarding both war and gender equality – the Sambias of New Guinea and the inhabitants of Vanatinai island in the South Pacific.

<sup>20</sup> Kleinbaum 1983, flies 1, 202, 206–7; *Washington Post*, August 3, 1998, Albright D3; Brady 1997.

<sup>21</sup> [www.tombraider.com](http://www.tombraider.com); Alta Vista search engine, June 23, 1999; Goodfellow 1998; personality: in Barboza 1998.

<sup>22</sup> Lee 1979, 388.

The Sambia are among the most warlike cultures ever studied, and also among the most sexist. Women are not only disenfranchised and subject to abuse, but villages are laid out with different paths for men and women. Male Sambia warriors are taken from their mothers at 7 to 10 years old to be trained and raised in a rigid all-male environment. Younger boys sexually “service” older ones, eventually reversing roles as they grow into warriors. This homosexual phase is supposed to build masculinity in the warrior. After marrying, these young men adopt heterosexuality but treat their wives very harshly. Sambia society is marked by extreme male dominance and the suppression of the feminine in the male’s world. Not surprisingly, warfare among the Sambia is strictly a male occupation. Nor are the Sambia exceptional in this regard. Of the most warlike societies known, none requires women to participate in combat, and in all of them cultural concepts of masculinity motivate men to fight.<sup>23</sup>

Vanatinai island, by contrast, is one of the most gender-egalitarian societies ever studied. In this culture, men and women are virtually equal in power and move fluidly across gendered roles. One exception to this gender equality (mentioned late in a newspaper article that declared the “sexes equal” on Vanatinai) was that “[i]n earlier times, warfare was the one important activity reserved exclusively for men.” Although long pacified by colonial rule, the culture still retains this asymmetry: when a 6-year-old girl joined some boys in throwing mock spears, her mother “came out of the house . . . and said, irritably, ‘Are you a man that you throw spears?’ The girl burst into tears and ran into the house.” So although gender relations on Vanatinai are radically different from those among the Sambia, one commonality is war-fighting – a male occupation.<sup>24</sup>

The pattern of Vanatinai repeats in five other relatively peaceful and gender-equal societies – the Semai of Malaya, the Siriono of Bolivia, the Mbuti of central Africa, the !Kung of southern Africa, and the Copper Eskimo of Canada. All are gatherer-hunters and the first two also engage in some slash-and-burn agriculture. All have in common “open and basically egalitarian decision making and social control processes.” Long-term material inequality between individuals cannot exist because these societies “produce little or no surplus.” In these five societies, relative gender egalitarianism prevails in most areas of life (compared with agricultural and industrial societies). Both genders (and sometimes children) participate in food gathering in four of the five societies (!Kung food gathering is mainly a female occupation). Both genders likewise participate in fishing (the Semai), and in horticulture (in both slash-and-burn societies). In some instances only females perform “domestic” tasks

<sup>23</sup> Herdt 1987; Herdt 1981, 209; Huyghe 1986, 35; none: Goldschmidt 1989.

<sup>24</sup> Lepowsky 1993; Wilford 1994.