

## Periplus to the Unknown. The Greek Conquest of the Black Sea and the Origin of the Amazon Myths

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**Abstract:** *The aim of this paper is to address the colonisation of the Pontus in relation to the Amazon myths. An attempt will be made to clarify the difficulties in identifying both the initial contacts between the Greeks and the ancient steppe nomad peoples in that region and the origin of the Amazon myths on the basis of the apparently more egalitarian lifestyle of those societies<sup>2</sup>. Similarly, the intention is to offer an explanation for the presence of iconographic pieces of an Amazon character in that liminal space. The Amazon kingdom, regardless of whether it has been located preferably in the southern Pontus or less frequently in its northern or eastern reaches, was undoubtedly connected with the Black Sea. Even though those myths are rooted in a time long before the period in which the region was colonised by the Greeks, they formed part of it, as occurred with many other accounts dealing with the Argonauts, Medea and so forth, with the mission of exploring those distant lands, bringing them closer to the Greek world and facilitating their control, as well as converting them into essential elements for identifying the 'other' and, by extension, Hellenic culture itself.*

**Rezumat:** *Acest articol abordează tema colonizării Pontului în legătură cu miturile amazoniene. Se va încerca să se identifice atât contacte inițiale dintre greci și vechile popoare nomade de stepă din acea regiune, cât și originea miturilor amazoniene pe baza stilului de viață al acelor societăți. Regatul amazoanelor, indiferent dacă a fost localizat de preferință în sudul Pontului sau mai rar în partea sa nordică sau estică, a fost fără îndoială legat de Marea Neagră.*

**Keywords:** Amazons, Black Sea, scythians, stasis, colonization.

### 1. Introduction

The Archaic period was one of the turning points in the history of Hellenistic colonisation, not only along the shores of the Mediterranean but beyond, and at that time the eastern edge of the known world was Euxinus Pontus. As geographical knowledge of the region advanced, the Greeks began to establish their first colonies, first along the northern and western coasts, and then in the areas to the south and east<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> SANCHEZ SANZ 2019a, 25.

<sup>3</sup> GATES (2015, 41) prefers to call these settlements "Greek presence", a generic term that leaves aside their formal characteristics (*apoikía*, *cleruquia*, *emporion*) and therefore excludes other possibilities such as the creation of districts in already existing cities, transitory nuclei generated by the most diverse motivations and not only commercial ones, etc.

The reasons for this process are manifold: the increase in the population of the metropolis<sup>4</sup>, situations of stagnation, we could even assume that the commercial relations that existed in the Cretan-Mycenaean period tried to be maintained to some extent<sup>5</sup>, even if they were reduced<sup>6</sup>. In the Bronze Age, however, Greek curiosity about what was originally called *Pontus Axenos* led some adventurers to explore it. We are talking about a time when the myths of Greek heroes began to develop in connection with these places, perhaps inspired by them<sup>7</sup>. Herakles, Theseus, Bellerophon<sup>8</sup>, Jason's Argonauts, the sons of Atamantius, etc. travelled there when it was believed that only a few brave men had decided to risk leaving their borders for the unknown, to make their way among the barbarian peoples and mythical creatures that populated those liminal regions beyond the Dardanelles<sup>9</sup>. It is interesting to note, however, that the Greek word *xenos* was used to designate both 'foreigner' and 'guest', implying a much more heterogeneous concept of the foreign than we might at first think.

The existence of the 'other' is an imperative need for self-definition, and the Greeks prided themselves on possessing a culture, laws and customs that they understood to be far more civilised than those in opposition<sup>10</sup>. For Greek culture, the barbarian was not just one who spoke a language different from their own<sup>11</sup>, but one who belonged to an alien and therefore intrinsically different culture, so that the more aspects that made him totally different, the more so. They had to search for resources, land, but also to get to know the "other"<sup>12</sup> in order to know themselves, without excluding the adventurous component.

## 2. The Amazon Kingdom

On its shores lay the supposed home of the Amazons, but also legendary kingdoms such as Colchis, which attracted intrepid men hoping to go down in history for their exploits. These explorations began with the naming of these places, a way of removing them from the halo of mystery, such as the Hellespont, the Propontide, Lake Meotis, and so on. These early

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<sup>4</sup> Contrary to what Blundell (1995, 66) argues, if there really had been an established programme of infanticide at times of population increase, there would have been no need for the creation of colonies.

<sup>5</sup> KUHRT 2002 268; GATES 1999, 278.

<sup>6</sup> SOLOVYOV 2015, 42.

<sup>7</sup> KOROMILA 1991, 16.

<sup>8</sup> Palephates (*Peri Apiston*, 28) says that Pegasus was not a winged horse but the name of his ship.

<sup>9</sup> IVANTCHIK (1998, 307) argues that tales such as those of Herakles, Troy, the Argonauts, etc. would have originated in local mythical traditions whose appearance in Hellenistic legends would have been promoted as a form of inclusion of that local "History", rather than as an attempt at differentiation from the "Other". However, it is difficult to believe that such stories, especially those concerning the greatness of heroes and patriotic deeds, were intended primarily as such.

<sup>10</sup> Although the pejorative character implied by this term was not universally recognised by the Greeks (ROMILLY 1993, 283-292 and 1994-1995, 187-196).

<sup>11</sup> LÉVY 1984, 5-14; BASLEZ 1986, 284-299.

<sup>12</sup> SANCHEZ SANZ 2017, 146.

seafarers would become part of Greek mythology, like the Argonauts. It is said that they not only reached Pontus, but also set out on other voyages in different regions, as if they wanted to combine all Greek seafaring daring in a single story. Despite the difficulty of assigning a date to a mythical story, Jason's voyage has been placed in the Hellenic imaginary around the 13th century BC<sup>13</sup>, and therefore its members preceded the Achaeans who travelled to Troy by one or more generations. We can deduce from this voyage that the Argo may have had twenty-five oars on each side, in keeping with the period, and that its mission was to reach the apparently rich region of Colchis.

There is another reason to note the importance of this journey, for although we have six classical accounts that list its members, one of them, Ps. Apollodorus (*Epít.* 1, 9, 16), includes a woman, Atalanta. It is surprising that she was allowed to take part, given the qualities associated with her courage and bravery, and we cannot attribute her inclusion in Apollodorus' account to the increase in women's freedoms that seems to have occurred in the Hellenistic period, since other authors who list their members and wrote later, such as Hyginus or Valerius Flaccus, do not include her. Apollodorus' source was probably earlier and perhaps not used by them, which adds to its interest. We could analyse it as a reminiscence of earlier times (in this case the Bronze Age) when the status of women allowed such adventures, but we will not go too far, even though the characteristics that define Atalanta are in many cases similar to those of the Amazons themselves.

However, the mere knowledge of the existence of such distant places would imply voyages even earlier than those of the Argonauts, or knowledge of stories told by sailors and traders of other peoples. The region was located on the east coast of Pontus, in the Caucasus, rich in metals and therefore known for its craftsmanship. They traded with Mesopotamia and Asia Minor, from where the story of their existence would have reached Greece via the ports located on the Near Eastern coast. When the Argonauts managed to reach the Propontide, the story suggests that only Herakles knew the land. This would place his adventures with the Amazons in an earlier time and make him their guide, as one of Jason's companions. Herakles had met the Amazons during his ninth labour, and his mythical kingdom is often associated with southern Pontus, where his famous capital, Themyscira<sup>14</sup>, was located. As we shall see in many of the Amazonian tales, including those associated with Herakles, some of the unknown places that became sacred landmarks of these legendary voyages were associated with the propitiatory actions of the gods in the face of such a risky undertaking, intended to facilitate the creation of later colonies.

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<sup>13</sup> KOROMILA (1991, 17) places it between 1280-1260 BC.

<sup>14</sup> Call. *H.* 648; Plu. *Dem.* 19, *Thes.* 27 and *Pomp.* 35; A. R. 2. 373-377, 96-1000; Hellan. *Fr.* 172; Hec. *Fr.* 203; Str. 1. 3. 7; D. S. 2. 44-46; Prop. 3. 14. 12 and 7. 71; Iust. *Epit.* 2. 4; App. *Mith.* 1. 69; Ps. Apollod. *Epit.* 2. 9; Philostr. *Her.* 23, 56-57; Arr. *FHG.* 58 (cfr. Eustath. ad Dionys 828); Ps. Callisth. 3. 25-27; Amm. 22.8; A. Pr. 720-730; Hdt. 4. 110 and 9. 27; Paus. 1. 2; Ephor. *FHG.* 103.

The existence of shrines, the celebration of rituals, the graves of Argonauts (A. R. 2. 927-928) or other companions of expeditions in these places not only offered the colonists a link to a heroic patriotic ancestor, but also promised their favour and protection for the fortunes of these colonies. On the other hand, they were settling in strange territory, far from home and usually surrounded by unknown and possibly hostile peoples. In fact, as Koromila points out, actions such as the works of Herakles were considered by the Greeks to be "exorcisms" in which the obstacle of fear of the unknown was overcome<sup>15</sup>. As a result, these places were considered favourable to the arrival of settlers, who no longer had anything to fear because they had been "purified" by the heroes who had left their mark as a sign of the superiority of Greek culture.

### **3. The settlement of South Pontus**

In the Bronze Age, navigating the high seas through unknown waters was too risky. The search was on for safer coastal routes that could provide the necessary supplies. The route close to the southern coast of Pontus was apparently less dangerous than the northern one, with its strong currents and frequent storms<sup>16</sup>. This may have contributed to the fact that the earliest and most common accounts of the Amazons locate their home in this coastal region of Pontus, rather than in the even more unknown northern region. In order to reach this place without crossing the open sea, part of the route required a stopover in the no less dangerous Thracian territory. But the 1,200 kilometres or so that make up the southern coast of Pontus are no less difficult.

Mountains such as the K rođlu Mountains and the Pontic Alps form a natural wall running parallel to the coast almost from the Bosphorus to the Caucasus, which stopped cloud formations and winds from the north. The resulting formation of storms, or the occurrence of storms that were fed by the rivers of northern Anatolia, created a situation that made navigation extremely difficult. As if that were not enough, these rivers were widened by these rains to such an extent that their torrents carried all sorts of elements with them, such as logs and mud, which were washed ashore in violent deltas, creating currents opposite to the usual ones in Pontus, which in many cases led to the formation of dangerous whirlpools.

Undoubtedly, the first Greek navigators of Pontus had good reason to pass on these dangers, which were eventually personified in mythical creatures that were not very hospitable. Reaching the realm of the Amazons, the Gates of Hades or Colchis were feats that were impossible for those Bronze Age pentecoster without seeking permanent shelter and sailing close to the coast. Nevertheless, the first Greek colonies in Pontus were to be located there, in those safe places that would become landmarks. These voyages allowed them to be

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<sup>15</sup> KOROMILA 1991, 26.

<sup>16</sup> KOROMILA 1991, 22.

known earlier, as they must have been developed in Mycenaean times and served as the basis for the mythical stories they became<sup>17</sup>, although colonisation in these places did not begin until the 7th century BC.

Furthermore, the oldest known journey to Pontus is that of Pseudo Scylax (dated late 4th or early 3rd century BC), although it is thought that he was a compiler who collected traditions from previous journeys<sup>18</sup>, and we do not know whether he was referring to information obtained during the colonisation period or perhaps even earlier. However, that as early as the Chalcolithic period (late 5th millennium B.C.) there were permanent trade contacts between the Balkans and the Volga-Urals. These were based on the exchange of products, especially copper from the deposits where it was mined in these regions. Authors such as Koromila argue for the probable existence of small settlements prior to the great wave of colonisation, which would serve as a basis for it<sup>19</sup>. Many of these settlements would have emerged from the first ones and would have tried to locate themselves as close as possible to the new metropolis, since the latter initially supplied them with manufactured products for trade during the Archaic period<sup>20</sup>.

Various authors argue that, although the existence of land routes would be fundamental, these would be complemented by another maritime route through Pontus, the existence of which could explain the wealth of sites such as Varna (located on the western coast of Pontus, less than 200 kilometres south of the mouth of the Danube) in this period<sup>21</sup>. In addition, other necropolises have been discovered along the next stretch of the Pontic coast which, unlike those further inland, contain dozens of princely tombs (such as that of Durnakulak). Their grave goods are not as lavish, which would also be evidence of the enrichment of the elite through maritime trade in Pontus<sup>22</sup>.

However, in both Varna and Durnakulak, male burials are clearly distinguished from female burials. The latter contain a greater quantity of metal objects and weapons, as opposed to utensils and ornaments in the female burials<sup>23</sup>. We cannot defend the existence of the mythical matriarchal societies that various authors associate with the Copper Age<sup>24</sup>, nor can we rule out a prominent role for women, especially considering that at least 10% of these graves have been attributed to men only on the basis of the objects found in them (weapons), and not through a proper analysis<sup>25</sup> that could help us understand this type of society in

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<sup>17</sup> KOROMILA 1991, 26.

<sup>18</sup> ROSTOWZEW 1993, 25.

<sup>19</sup> KOROMILA 1991, 34.

<sup>20</sup> COOK, DUPONT 1998, 44; ERSOY 2000, 406.

<sup>21</sup> CHERNYKH 1992, 46; KHOL 2007, 39.

<sup>22</sup> KHOL 2007, 47; TODOROVA 2002, 277.

<sup>23</sup> TODOROVA 1999, 245.

<sup>24</sup> SANCHEZ SANZ 2023c, 65.

<sup>25</sup> BAILEY, HOFMANN 2005, 221.

greater detail. The existence of this route, which predates the Mycenaean period by almost three millennia, could have served as a basis for the Achaean explorers, whose knowledge would have been passed on until the start of the great colonisation of Pontus from the 8th century BC onwards.

A third of the works of Herakles are set in Pontus, followed by the Argonauts, Theseus and even Odysseus himself after the Trojan War<sup>26</sup>. All of these could only reflect voyages undertaken in distant times, perhaps even before the Trojan War. In addition to such accounts of the pre-Greek presence in the region, archaeology also helps us to understand the interest in Agamemnon's homeland. Excavations on the western Black Sea coast have uncovered numerous remains of Mycenaean artefacts, such as metal ingots with linear engravings (at Cape Kaliakra and Cherkovo, Bulgaria) dated to the 14th-11th centuries BC, and underwater research has recovered more than 150 anchor stones from the Bulgarian coast (at Cape Kaliakra, Nessebar, Sozopol and elsewhere <sup>27</sup>) that are mentioned in the Argonauts' account. Similarly, Mycenaean artefacts have been found on the coast of the Sea of Marmara, as well as fragments of pottery in northern Anatolia, which, although located some 130 km from the southern coast of Pontus, cannot be ruled out as having been transported there via a coastal trading post<sup>28</sup>.

In northern Pontus (Trachtemirov, near Kiev), objects very similar to the greaves characteristic of the Mycenaean world<sup>29</sup> have been found. These elements could suggest that Mycenaean sailors were the protagonists of these stories<sup>30</sup> and that their mythology formed the basis for much of the later Greek corpus<sup>31</sup>. The characteristics of this part of the coast are very different from those of the north and south. The coastal hinterland was much more extensive than in the southern part of Pontus, allowing for greater agricultural use. The geographical proximity to Greece and the better conditions may have attracted the Mycenaean sailors to this area earlier than elsewhere, where they arrived later. Thus, between the 14th and 13th centuries BC, this was probably the time when the unknown and inhospitable region of Pontus began to reveal its secrets, which would help the subsequent wave of colonisers to have details of what they would find.

One of the most important early Greek colonies in southern Pontus, Sinope, was founded much later and is associated with the Argonauts (Str. 12. 1, 11; V. Fl. 5. 108; A. R. 2. 947). Its site had two bays that acted as natural harbours, probably known long before as part of the landmarks mentioned in the mythical voyages. Archaeological work has shown that the site

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<sup>26</sup> SOLOVYOV 2015, 9.

<sup>27</sup> POROGEANOV 1980, 69-72.

<sup>28</sup> TSETSKHLADZE 2006, 77; FRENCH 1982 21-28; MELLINK 1985, 558; RE, 1986, 349-350 and 353; HILLER 1991, 208.

<sup>29</sup> HILLER 1991, 211; HÜTTEL 1981, 47.

<sup>30</sup> KOROMILA 1991, 191.

<sup>31</sup> NILSSON 1983, 137.

was not inhabited before the 7th century BC, although it is far from complete, as the inland area and the harbour have not yet been investigated. This colony was important because it was very close to the mouth of the river Thermodonte, the place where many authors have placed the mythical capital of the Amazons, and which therefore allowed the Greeks to have direct knowledge of this region, until then part of the liminal world.

The establishment of other colonies on the west coast, such as Apollonia and Odysso (south of Cape Kaliakra), has been dated to the same period. This may indicate that Greek colonisation activity in this period followed an initial route across the Bosphorus eastwards, following the southern coast of Pontus, and northwards towards its western counterpart, its proliferation in such a short space of time perhaps due to the 'race' for the best areas to settle. The north coast soon suffered the same fate, with important colonies such as Olbia. There, from the 7th century BC onwards, the mouths of the great rivers Danube, Dniester and Dnieper would provide access to river navigation that would reach much further north, with Greek ships of the time even sailing close to the Donets River, a tributary of the Don, which flows into Lake Meotis (Sea of Azov). However, the enormous volume of water that they dumped in this region created strong currents, some of them underwater, and dangerous deltas that made it one of the last to be settled. These same masses of water, together with the strong winds that created storms and permanent fog banks, and the darkness of the water caused by the shoals of fish that struggled to get out through the Cimmerian Bosphorus, would make it a death trap for inexperienced sailors.

Probably between the late 8th and early 7th centuries BC, the Hellenes settled in the Hellespont and the Propontide<sup>32</sup> in order to control the Bosphorus Strait. The Aeolians, Ionians and Dorians spent the next half century continuing their coastal expeditions, reaching Asia Minor between 1100 and 1000 BC<sup>33</sup>. Gradually, these newcomers turned Pontus into a 'Greek sea', where the fear of navigating its open waters had disappeared, and communication not only intensified but also shortened the time needed to do so. The distance between modern-day Crimea and the Bosphorus was only 500 km in a straight line, which could be travelled in two or three days, whereas by coastal navigation the distance would be almost doubled. Colonies such as Trapezunte on the south-east coast, originally associated with the Amazon kingdom, were only five or six days away. The Aeolians of Lesbos may have been the first to initiate this process in the 8th century BC, when they decided to settle on the Asian coast of the Dardanelles entrance after occupying the ruins of Ilion. Shortly afterwards they added the enclaves of Sigeion and Aquileion, but it was the Milesians who decided to venture even further afield, at the beginning of the 7th century BC, after founding Abydos, also on the Asian coast of the Dardanelles, they would do the same with Cyzicus, Proconesus and Panormo.

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<sup>32</sup> KOROMILA 1991, 52.

<sup>33</sup> THOMAS, CONANT 1999, 80-83.

As a result, they came to control most of the Propontide and the island of Marmara, not even venturing to the opposite Thracian coast for fear of occupying Thracian territory. The Aeolians, for their part, did the same with Priapus and Parion, until they had secured Hellenic domination of the entire Asian coast from the Dardanelles to the Bosphorus. This, what we might call the first colonial phase, was completed in just one generation (about 30 years<sup>34</sup>), and it was only in the following generation that the invasion of Pontus would begin, after the decision had been made to face the mythical dangers there. This is also related to the possibility of understanding that the Hellenes hoped to achieve with the indigenous population. In this first attempt at colonisation, the Phrygians and Lydians were of a similar culture to the newcomers, so relations did not pose too many difficulties; but the picture was quite different when dealing with the Thracians on the west and north-west coast, or the Scythians to the north and north-east of Pontus.

We know from Homer (*Il*, 2. 851 and 856), when he lists Priam's allies, that they included the Paflagonians and peoples such as the Halizones, known for their silver deposits. The former controlled part of the southern coast of Pontus and the latter probably settled close to it. Mythology associates the latter with the Amazons, whose mythical kingdom, according to some authors, was located between modern Samsun and Trebizond<sup>35</sup> on the south-eastern Pontic coast. Samsun is situated in a wide bay, about 75 km west of the mouth of the Thermodon, the option most favoured by the classics as the home of the Asian warriors. It was a place that would have been passed by the ships of Herakles, Theseus or the Argonauts, who would have encountered these people and recorded their existence as part of the stories told much later by Homer.

Conversely, the Thracians were not as condescending as the Anatolian peoples. They did not readily allow colonisation of the coastal strip they controlled in Pontus, and were just as reluctant to colonise the northern Aegean as they had been in the past. Perhaps it was the difficulty of settling there that was largely responsible for the colonisation of Pontus. At the time it was made up of different, sometimes warring, peoples living in small settlements. They were regarded by the Greeks as barbarians with whom, despite their warlike nature, they managed to trade, importing handicrafts that were highly prized among them<sup>36</sup>, especially by the elite. They were not a sea-oriented culture like the Hellenes, for they had a large territory, but the Aeolians, Ionians and the other colonising peoples were reluctant to send expeditions to their shores because of their traditional aversion.

They were not a sea-oriented culture like the Hellenes, for they had a large territory, but the Aeolians, Ionians and other colonising peoples were reluctant to send expeditions to their shores because of their traditional hostility. They were not alone in their interest. In the first

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<sup>34</sup> KOROMILA 1991, 54.

<sup>35</sup> KOROMILA 1991, 36.

<sup>36</sup> SOLOVYOV 2015, 10.



quarter of the 7th century BC, the Megarians also wanted to join the wave of colonisation and, not wanting to settle near the new Milesian cities, they decided to try to get away from the existing tensions with their Athenian and Corinthian neighbours, their first step being the foundation of strategic sites on the Propontide, specifically on the dangerous Thracian coast. There they founded Selimbria and Byzantium<sup>37</sup>, but also other cities on the Asian coast such as Astracus (Nicomedia) and Chalcedon. Their intention seemed to be to gain control of the passage between the Sea of Marmara and Pontus.

These settlements were also important because they were close to the Bosphorus Strait, from where they could continue their colonisation work even further afield, following in the footsteps of their ancestral hero, Herakles. Later, in the middle of the 6th century BC, the Megarenses decided to risk a new expedition and succeeded in founding the colony of Heraclea Pontica on the south-west coast of Pontus, very close to the strait, in honour of the Greek hero. Almost 125 years had passed since their arrival in the Propontides. The relations between Greece and this region were intensifying. At the end of the 7th century BC, the Samians wanted to participate and founded the colony of Perinthus very close to the Megarian settlements on the Thracian coast. The Thracians apparently did not try to prevent this, and from this time on many more settlements appeared.

Gradually, by the end of the 6th century BC, Pontus had become that "Greek sea" which, while retaining some of its dangers, would no longer remain the land of mysteries and mythical beings that it had once been considered to be. The Ionians alone established more than a hundred colonies on its shores<sup>38</sup>, if we include those on the upper reaches of the great rivers that flowed into it, to which we must add those of the rest of their competitors. We know little of those intrepid times that has not come down to us through Greek or Roman accounts. Peoples such as the Scythians, Thracians, Cimmerians, etc., did not use writing to inform us of the foreigners who had recently arrived in their territories, and when, on rare occasions, they did, they chose to use their own language.

#### **4. Northern Pontus**

Once they had overcome their initial fears of the inhospitable region, it was time to venture into the northern part of Pontus, between the Danube and the Don, where the

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<sup>37</sup> Mythology tells us that Byzantium was founded by the eponymous king Bizas (Str. 7. 320; Tac. *Ann.* 12. 63). When the Thracians attacked the city, he defeated and pursued them, but the Scythian king Odrisus took advantage of this to attack the city and it was his wife, Fidaleia, who managed to avoid the siege by fighting alongside the women of the city, who threw snakes at the Scythians from the city wall. This story was not the only one; many others associated with numerous peoples throughout antiquity recount similar situations where women acted against the enemies attacking their cities. In this case, however, it was the case of the Greek Magyars, who would have acted in this way against what their male counterparts understood to be appropriate, even in extreme cases (as Homer recounts of the Trojan women's participation in the war).

<sup>38</sup> KOROMILA 1991, 74.

Milesians made contact with their Scythian neighbours. In the strategic Istros delta, they founded Istris (c. 630 BC) to control this trade route, followed by other settlements such as Dionysopolis<sup>39</sup>, Tomis, Odessa, etc. They were not the only ones; nearby, Megarian foundations such as Kalatis and Mesembria began to appear. There, the favourable attitude of the Thracians towards the settlers allowed them to advance further into Scythian territory, where they were just as receptive to the new settlers as the Thracians. Trade relations were soon established with those whom the Greeks called the Scythians, believing them to be descended from one of the sons of Herakles, a Scythian sired by a half-woman, half-serpent creature (a chthonic association<sup>40</sup>).

Herodotus (4.5-7) offers three versions of the origin of the Scythians: the one mentioned above, which he puts down to the colonists who settled in northern Pontus, the one that traces them back to Zeus through his son Targiteus and his union with the daughter of the deity associated with the river Boristhenes (stressing that this is the one defended by the nomads themselves), and a third, more plausible one<sup>41</sup>. They are interesting in that they have been studied and alluded to by many authors in an attempt to associate the Scythians with the theory of the trifunctional society<sup>42</sup>, and even suggestive in that some minority classical sources speak of the existence of not one but three Amazon kingdoms (A. R. 2. 378-390) whose existence could be linked to Scythian mythology. Moreover, the similarities are even greater when some authors refer to them as "*sauromatids*" (Plin. *HN*. 6. 39) to emphasise this relationship once again, while the Scythians drank the blood of their first slain enemy and only after this test could they attend the annual celebration reserved for men who had passed the test (Hdt. 4. 64-65; Arist 7. 1324b). To be left without a husband or unable to attend was a source of shame and the process to avoid this was similar.

In the case of the Indo-Europeans, early historians, geographers and ethnographers evoked kinship on the basis of linguistic differences since antiquity. Large groups of peoples, such as the Celts, Germans and Scythians, were defined in part by linguistic criteria. The 19th century was the height of the study of Indo-European culture and its associated languages in search of a common root. The various major "branches" that we know of soon emerged and

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<sup>39</sup> Inscriptions referring to female rituals performed in honour of the Great Mother Pontic have been found here (Lazarenko et al., 2013, 50).

<sup>40</sup> USTINOVA (2007, 65; 1999, 74) associates it with the goddess Api-Ge, related by Herodotus (4. 59) to Gaia and to the aquatic element in the Avesta. Others like Grakow (1980, 76) simply associate it with a primordial Mother Goddess.

<sup>41</sup> However, coins minted by the Scythian king Athenaeus (mid-4th century BC) in the Greek colonies of Pontus and featuring the head of Herakles have been found, which may indicate that Scythian rulers came to accept this version of their ancestor as their own; just as depictions of his half-human, half-serpent companion (who may be related to an important deity in the Scythian pantheon) are also common in numismatic iconography (IVANTCHIK 1999, 212). If we can go further, the appearance of numerous ornaments (earrings, etc.) in many of the Scythian tombs and showing representations of gorgons could be especially accepted as an element of representation of that half-serpent primordial mother.

<sup>42</sup> GRAKOV, MELJUKOVA 1954, 43; RAEVSKIJ 1977, 73-74.

show great differences in their autonomous development, distinguishing Indian and Iranian, Sarmatian (Balto-Slavic), Thracian (which included Latin and Greek!), Gothic (Germanic), Celtic and Albanian. However, this definition will be hotly contested, and the long list of associated languages we know today is still incomplete. The old binary articulation between 'centum' and 'satem' languages has now been abandoned in favour of a more articulated and precise system.

As far as the Eurasian groups, their interrelations, their evolution and their migrations are concerned, we will focus more on the large Indo-Iranian (Aryan) group, classified as such because of its great similarities with the most archaic period, and associated with peoples such as the Scythians, Sarmatians, Alans, Sakas, etc. The Illyrians, for their part, although socially similar to the nomadic steppe groups (to a greater or lesser extent, depending on the tribes that make up this group), their language has posed a challenge to linguists to the point of being considered an independent branch of Indo-European, although this primordial character is not disputed. Be that as it may, the search for this linguistic origin has led experts to proclaim a focal point for the beginning of many of these cultures (Proto-Greek, Proto-Iranian, etc.), from which successive waves of migration settled them in what would become their traditional territories. There, the survival of autochthonous ethnic substrata would have favoured the development of differences between the main branches of the Indo-European language, contributing to the fragmentation of their initial characteristics, which are now defined as an ethnic group.

Dumezil's positions will not be discussed here, as this is not the purpose of this study, let alone the dispute over the common origin, which archaeology is far from being able to prove, or the difficulties of arguing phenomena of cultural, linguistic, etc. convergence with a primordial common past, although there are interesting aspects in this respect. What we can highlight is the majority defence that Indo-European culture must have been patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal<sup>43</sup>, because this makes it difficult to defend the existence of matrilineal rather than matriarchal societies among the groups descending from it. However, it would not prevent societies with more or less parity<sup>44</sup> from existing within this possible structure, as may have been the case among the nomadic tribes of the steppe in the Iron Age<sup>45</sup>, as opposed to other less egalitarian groups. On the other hand, the trifunctional theory applied to Indo-European religion has always clashed with the defenders of the possibility of a primordial and universal Mother Goddess, sometimes reaching intermediate points through the assumption of tripartite primordial deities (goddess, god, son, daughter, or with a triple character in the same figure).

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<sup>43</sup> LEBEDYNSKY 2014, 70.

<sup>44</sup> SANCHEZ SANZ 2023, 835; 2020b, 17.

<sup>45</sup> SANCHEZ SANZ 2024b, 197-198.

Regarding Eurasian cultures, there are social differences between members of the same branch which make it difficult to defend this trifunctional theory, such as the priestly caste of the Persians as opposed to its non-existence among the Scythians, if we exclude the Enareans, as well as in the political sphere, etc. Similarly, his assumption about Scythian origin myths seems to be poorly founded<sup>46</sup>. Lebedynsky argues that Indo-European vocabulary related to the agrarian world is surprisingly rare in the Indo-Iranian cultures that developed in the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages, which he attributes to the abandonment of agriculture by these societies in favour of a nomadism in which pre-existing terms were used until they disappeared<sup>47</sup>.

We cannot be sure, but if possible we could apply the same system to the situation of women in these societies, where the change in the economic system led to a greater need for women's collaboration, and this led to the abandonment of a patriarchal system as marked as the inherited one. Although we are not going to enter into the discussion about the chronological moment in which the Indo-European culture could have existed (since it is based between the Paleolithic and the 4th millennium BC, in an endless debate), it is important to know the region in which it is thought that it could have settled, perhaps between the Volga and the Ob, an area that would become the homeland of many of these nomadic Iron Age peoples (Scythians, Sarmatians, Sakas, etc.). The intention here is to show that the increased social importance of women did not happen at the same time in different places (at least in the pre-Iron Age), nor is it often possible to associate it with a nomadic economy. We cannot ignore the elements that most of them have in common and which are useful in understanding the level of interaction and influence that existed. We refer to kurgan burials (although on an artistic level the animal style and other peculiarities would also imply common elements<sup>48</sup> because most of these cultures practised this system at different times and places in the East and even further afield.

This fact did not escape the attention of Gimbutas, who, starting from Central Asia, explained the emergence, in the 5th millennium BC, of several agropastoral cultures linked to the original Indo-European nucleus, which would have maintained customs linked to it, which can be seen in their burial sites, the patriarchal system, the importance of cattle, horses, military matters, etc. These would be in contrast to the Neolithic cultures of the Danubian tradition, where the physical types (proto-European) would not show so much stature, strength, etc., and whose societies would be characterised by being peaceful, sedentary and more egalitarian. However, this theory, which has been used to partly explain the importance of the feminine in cultures such as the Minoan, Mycenaean, etc., has aspects that are difficult to resolve. In mainland Greece itself and elsewhere in Europe, Iron Age

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<sup>46</sup> SANCHEZ SANZ 2020a, 23.

<sup>47</sup> LEBEDYNSKY 2014, 75.

<sup>48</sup> SANCHEZ SANZ 2023a, 19.

societies were predominantly patriarchal, with very limited influence for women in general, a change that is difficult to explain on a common egalitarian basis. Similarly, many of the Iron Age nomadic steppe cultures would show more egalitarian societies, so they would start from very patriarchal and socially unequal groups.

In the Eurasian context we might, perhaps reluctantly, attribute it to the change in the economic system, although we will see that there were more egalitarian sedentary cultures and other nomadic cultures that were not at all egalitarian. Whereas in the European case the economic system did not change because the agrarian predominance was maintained in the face of such a social change. Therefore, although we can use this model to explain linguistic similarities, etc., it has shortcomings in other areas. Similarly, Gimbutas associates proto-European cultures with a preponderance of female deities (though not exclusively), which would have shown a change towards patriarchal pantheons, whereas in the Indo-Iranian groups the patriarchal pantheon would have been maintained, never presenting a predominantly feminine aspect a priori.

However, if we consider the theories of the spread of mother-goddess worship in Asia, it does not fit this theory either. It is assumed that Indo-European religion was patriarchal from the beginning, that the possible development of such cults would have occurred locally (with greater or lesser diffusion), and that although this may have been an influential factor in considering the role of women in such societies, this was not always the case. There are cities and cultures where this importance seems to be attested (Ionia, many of the colonies of Pontus, etc.) and where we know that the situation of women was not particularly prominent, at least not as it would be in other societies such as the Scythian or the Sarmatian, which had a multifaceted pantheon with important male and female divinities. This is important because the status of women in these societies does not seem to have depended on such a religious situation, not even in the Amazon world created by the Greeks, where they worshipped a male god (Ares).

According to the prevailing theory, the Kurgan cultures developed in four stages, during which several waves of migration (in the 5th, 4th and 3rd millennia BC) contributed not only to the spread of Indo-European characteristics, but also, in many cases, to their imposition on the indigenous populations living in Eastern Europe. This theory presupposes that the cultures included in the proposed designation had very similar characteristics, when this was not always the case; while it would require, at the very least, the appearance in Europe of cultures that had the main characteristic that defines them, burials in kurgans or the funerary use of ochre.

At the same time, this argument rules out local or predominantly local developments in favour of an invasion of Indo-European peoples. However, while such a population transfer may have been possible, we cannot rule out the possibility that, even if the resulting cultures showed characteristics associated with the Indo-European world (linguistic, etc.), the

predominance of the local element may have retained some of those characteristics which were their own and which could explain the differences that exist in many respects between European and Asian cultures. This is why the Kurgan theory still has many unclear and sometimes contradictory aspects, although it is useful in many respects and needs constant revision on the basis of new discoveries.

We have the contribution of an object of extraordinary value, not only for our knowledge of the mythical tradition associated with the creation of the Scythians, but also because it allows us to compare its account with that of Herodotus. We are talking about the *Tabula Albana*<sup>49</sup>. It contains an inscription which gives the version associated with Herakles, but with additional information. Although Herodotus did not mention the name of the mother of his children, here he mentions her as Echidna, and we should not be surprised since this is a creature from Greek mythology that fits the description perfectly. He also names their father, this time curiously as Araxe (which could be related to the river Aras, which flows south of the Caucasus, a place associated with the Amazon myth), whom Herakles would have defeated before taking them.

In this version only two sons were born and not three, Agatirsus (a name derived from the people of Agathyrsi, who the Greeks believed lived north of the Thracians and were associated with the Scythian culture, who, according to Herodotus, shared their women) and Scythians. He adds little more, but we do have a third version of the same account, this time thanks to Diodorus (2. 43), which authors such as Ivantchik consider to be the closest to the Scythian original that would have been collected at Olbia<sup>50</sup>. He begins by pointing out that the Scythians originally lived near the river Araxes, which associates the name of the son of Herakles with their supposed original homeland, from where they would have moved north to Pontus. He indicates that the characteristics of the Scythian "mother" are the same as those we have seen, but he does not indicate her name either, and this time he makes her father Zeus rather than Herakles. This union would have produced an only son, Scythian, who would become the first king of his people. However, the *Catalogue of Women*, a work attributed to Hesiod (*fr.* 150, 15-16), again refers to Herakles as her progenitor, which could indicate that this version is the one best known and accepted by the Scythians and the Greeks themselves.

However, despite its plight, we must be cautious in considering a movement that was strongly influenced by Russian Marxist Scythologists and by the Engel postulates on primordial matriarchy. It is also interesting to note that Herakles, the Greek hero par excellence, is related to the Scythians, since to make them his descendants is to make them half-Greek, and therefore contrary to the sense of "otherness" traditionally associated with them in classical sources<sup>51</sup>. While Raevskij attempts to explain this as an attempt by the

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<sup>49</sup> The story is only 4 lines long (IG XIV, 1293A, 1. 94-97).

<sup>50</sup> IVANTCHIK 1999, 215.

<sup>51</sup> HARTOG 1991, 41-45.

Greeks to establish a Hellenocentric<sup>52</sup> system, it is more likely to be seen as an interest on the part of the Greek settlers to establish points of contact with those on whom the survival of their settlement depended and with whom they hoped to establish trade relations. It is significant that the partner of Herakles was a wild and borderline creature, and that the hero himself is closely associated with nature, freedom and wildness, because this would explain the differences between the two cultures and allow them to maintain their opposition to the Greeks despite their ancestry.

It seems that Targiteus had three sons (by an unnamed mother): Lipoxais, Arpoxais and Colaxais; which posed a problem when it came to one of them inheriting power over the Scythians. One day (apparently as divine gifts) a plough<sup>53</sup>, a yoke, a vessel and a sword fell from the sky, all made of gold and burning hot from the journey. Only when the youngest, Coloxais, approached them could they be touched, and it was agreed that he must be the one to occupy the throne, although each of them stood as the ancestor of one of the Scythian tribes. The account of Herakles also makes him the father of three sons, to whom he bequeathed a bow and a golden belt<sup>54</sup>, indicating that only the one who succeeded in drawing it would become king. Only the youngest of them, the Scythian, will succeed, although again all of them were ancestors of several other tribes.

The latter is the more plausible version, and the one preferred by Herodotus. He states that they arrived in the steppes from the east in the 7th century BC, just before the arrival of the colonists, or at about the same time, when they were forced to leave their original homeland under pressure from the Masagetes. Some authors place their homeland in the area of the present-day Iranian province of Lorestan<sup>55</sup>. Their interest in trading with the Greeks, who were so skilled at working metal, was reflected in the elite's acquisition of exquisitely decorated and richly ornamented vessels. This interest favoured not only the survival of these settlements, but also the establishment of lasting trade relations that could even produce hybrid populations. However, these interactions were not always peaceful, as there were difficult moments when the Scythians took control of these colonies by force, even though the inhabitants provided them with defensive elements. Nevertheless, they were allowed to continue living in these places, maintaining their customs and traditions, until the passing of the centuries sometimes facilitated this cultural mixing and hybridisation.

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<sup>52</sup> RAEVSKIJ 1977, 161-171.

<sup>53</sup> In spite of the classical references to the important Scythian trade in cereal exports, archaeological remains have not yet located any iron ploughs associated with this culture, without which it is difficult to understand the high level of production. (PARZINGER 2009, 82).

<sup>54</sup> IVANTCHIK (1999, 214) considers the belt to be a symbol of the Indo-Iranian rites of passage of initiation, associated with integration into the Indian Brahmin caste and religions such as Zoroastrian and Mazdeist, which he uses to participate in the trifunctional theory that would mark the religious caste among the Scythians, although we cannot be sure.

<sup>55</sup> KOROMILA 1991, 77.

Despite this influence, the Scythians remained faithful to their way of life and customs, which did not include writing. Their interest in the sea was similar to that of the Thracians, Cimmerians, Paflagonians and other earlier inhabitants of these shores. They were a people with no maritime knowledge, who had no need to brave the inhospitable, foggy, wet and rugged coastal areas, battered by storms and gales, which made up most of them. These were mostly nomadic groups who needed and had vast steppe territories in the interior. The Greeks, on the other hand, lacked the fertile land at home to support their growing population, but they had the means, the maritime know-how and the courage to take risks in an undertaking that must have cost many lives. There they found the abundant raw materials they needed<sup>56</sup> and which these peoples enjoyed without having to fight for them in their homelands.

More than forty rivers flow into Pontus, most of them, and many of the most important ones, in the north-western part of its coasts. By navigating them, it was possible to reach the Carpathians, modern Ukraine and even the Caspian Sea and the Caucasus Mountains via the Fasis (Rioni). The Don (Tanais) is lost in Lake Meotis (Sea of Azov), but it joins the Volga inland in the steppe and follows it to the Caspian Sea. The Dnieper (Boristhenes) flows through modern Ukraine and almost reaches the Baltic Sea. The Danube (Istros) continues into the Balkans and Central Europe. The Dniester (Tiras) runs parallel to the Bug (Hipanis) and reaches modern Poland. Navigable rivers, rich in fish, connected vast regions and promoted both cultural exchange and economic development, helping to irrigate the fertile land along their banks. They never proved to be an insurmountable obstacle for these peoples, as their riverbeds often froze in the cold seasons, allowing passage without the need for boats. Nor, or even less so, for the Greeks. In Mycenaean times, the Dnieper was the route for the amber trade that reached Agamemnon's homeland<sup>57</sup>, and the myths of Apollo led him to travel these regions in search of the Hyperborean maidens, as depicted on the pediment of his temple at Delphi.

In the 6th century BC the Greeks reached the mouth of the Dniester and founded Nikonion. It is believed that the Scythians and Thracians were not interested in the area until the first quarter of the 6th century BC, as excavations in the region show that it was uninhabited at that time<sup>58</sup>. The problem of establishing a secure border between the Thracians and the Scythians is far from solved, although it seems that the area between the Dniester and the Danube was traditionally under Scythian control. Similarly, with the exception of the Trojans, the Scythians seem to have had access to the coastal areas of their territories only as part of the seasonal migrations necessitated by their animal husbandry<sup>59</sup>,

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<sup>56</sup> KOROMILA 1991, 79.

<sup>57</sup> KOROMILA 1991, 84.

<sup>58</sup> KOROMILA 1991, 122.

<sup>59</sup> GAVRILYUK 1999, 138-139.



since the areas used as winter pastures were located there. In fact, the dating of the settlements and the remains found in the necropolises associated with them have shown, as in the case of Berezan, that the burials of the local population in these necropolises began only a few decades after the establishment of the settlement

In the colonies of northern Pontus, this would imply the existence of a period of contact between the newcomers and the indigenous population, before the latter were integrated into them or into their *chora*<sup>60</sup>, thanks to the transfer of land on lease by the settlers and the authorisation to trade in the city markets<sup>61</sup>. Prior to this, the settlements may not have been permanent or very small. The existence of autochthonous elements in the *chora* of numerous colonies in northern Pontus has been archaeologically proven<sup>62</sup>, but given that it was the Scythians who permitted such settlements and that their primary relationship was economic, it is more likely that the settlers themselves sought such proximity and that exchange in their markets was desired by both sides, as they needed the products their new trading allies could supply them with.

The first settlers were traders interested in the region's abundant raw materials, such as iron, copper and food. These were essential supplies for their metropolises, given the social and political problems they were experiencing at the time due to external pressures. The Scythians would have allowed such settlements until, between the end of the 7th and the beginning of the 6th century BC, the interest aroused by the products of metropolitan origin made available to them by the colonists made it possible for them to open up to the integration of the local population. Indeed, from the earliest days of the Cimmerian Bosphorus colonies, a wealth of foreign pottery has been found at various sites, which would indicate not only constant contact but also a shared interest in foreign products<sup>63</sup>. This was not a Greek permission to settle in their *chora*, but a prior agreement for the establishment of the colony between both parties, which implied mutual, regulated and beneficial commercial relations. In fact, the importance of the indigenous population would be even greater, since we know that many of the settlers married local women<sup>64</sup>, with all that this would imply for the social and cultural organisation of these settlements. Without the raw materials they used for trade, their profits would have been considerably reduced, and the processed products they imported from their metropolis would not have found an adequate outlet.

In the 7th century BC, local raw materials were exchanged for processed objects, mostly vase painting, which is abundantly attested in Scythian burials of this period. This

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<sup>60</sup> SOLOVYOV 1999, 3-4; 2015, 101.

<sup>61</sup> Regardless of whether these indigenous groups had attained a high social status in these colonies or remained socially and politically relegated in them, as Graham argues (1964, 106-107).

<sup>62</sup> ROGOV 2005, 196-199.

<sup>63</sup> VINOGRADOV, KRYZIICKIJ 1995, 159-160.

<sup>64</sup> VINOGRADOV 2015, 130; MOREL 1983, 134; HANSEN 2000, 146.

demonstrates the high value placed on it by local elites. Large quantities of Rhodian-Ionian pottery have been found in Scythian fortified centres such as Belskoye, as well as workshops where local craftsmen may have worked on its production and redistribution<sup>65</sup>. In the first centuries of the existence of these new settlements, it seems clear that the percentage of pottery coming from the metropolis of the Anatolian coast is much higher than the remains found in mainland Greece<sup>66</sup>. However, these percentages would fluctuate over time, with an increase in the number of continental pieces and those of imitation manufacture to the detriment of the former. This type of object is important for our study because, as we will see later, some of the most important sites where a greater number of vases with Amazon scenes have been found are located in northern Pontus, which could reflect a particular interest in this mythical theme on the part of the Scythians.

The oldest Greek colony in northern Pontus was the Milesian Olbia (c. 630 BC), located in the delta of the river Hippanis. A wealth of pottery (containing wine and oil) from Chios, Samos, Rhodes, Athens and other Ionian cities has been found there, as well as bronze mirrors<sup>67</sup>, which would have been in great demand among the Scythian female population. As a result, Olbia became one of the most important Greek importing colonies from its foundation until the 4th century BC<sup>68</sup>. The area between the Dniester and the Bug rivers was extremely fertile thanks to its watercourses, which made it easier for the Scythians who settled in this part of their territory to abandon their traditional nomadic life and become sedentary farmers, using these colonies to sell their surpluses. The territory controlled by Olbia<sup>69</sup> also included the mouth of the Dnieper (Boristhenes), named after the people who inhabited it, the Boristhenites (Plin. *NH.* 4. 82), according to some sources. Beyond it lay the Tauride, also called the Tauric Chersonese (Crimea), a peninsula connected to the mainland by a narrow isthmus, which, thanks to a vast plain that occupies 80% of its surface, allows it to be described as an extension of the Eurasian steppe<sup>70</sup>.

Once again, the Milesians were the first to decide to occupy a favourable position on their south-western coast. However, the area was controlled by a Scythian tribe, the Tauroi, who were known to Herodotus to be ruthless to anyone who came to their land (Hdt. 4. 103; Str. 7. 4, 5). Foreigners were sacrificed to an unnamed virgin goddess whom the Greeks identified as Iphigenia, daughter of Agamemnon and priestess of Artemis. It was thought to be the sanctuary of Orestes, built when he fled from the Furies for his crime. Apparently the Milesians abandoned the settlement in the face of local resistance and tried the south-eastern

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<sup>65</sup> BRAUND 2007, 36.

<sup>66</sup> SOLOVYOV 2015, 93.

<sup>67</sup> JACOBSON 1995, 43.

<sup>68</sup> BOUZEK 2000, 11.

<sup>69</sup> HANSEN, NIELSEN 2004, 936-937.

<sup>70</sup> KOROMILA 1991, 135.

shore. There they had better luck and in the early 6th century BC they founded Theodosia at the entrance to the Taman peninsula. It was not until the last quarter of the 5th century BC that the metropolis of Heraclea Pontica decided to venture there and found the fortified city of Chersonesus<sup>71</sup>.

The Taman Peninsula and the nearby Kerch Peninsula formed the strait known as the Cimmerian Bosphorus (Kerch Strait), which gave access to Lake Meotide. The Greeks called it a lake, rather than recognising it as a sea, because it was formed by the mouth of the River Don and was not navigable for heavy ships. Its shallow depth (12.8-14.6 m), the width of its sandbanks and its high silt content prevented it from being navigable. Nevertheless, at the end of the 7th century BC<sup>72</sup>, the Ionians established settlements on both sides of the strait, such as Panticapea<sup>73</sup>, Hermonasa and Phanagoria. Recent archaeological work has uncovered a large number of rich Scythian tombs in the area, containing a wealth of handicrafts not only from these colonies but also from Athens itself, Samos, Chios and Sinope.

This situation testifies to their commercial importance, as well as the expansion of import-export routes<sup>74</sup>, whose objects were in great demand by the Scythian aristocracy and also by the Thracian aristocracy further west. Many of these objects were made in the Greek style in their subject matter and execution, but others were made by these craftsmen as commissions<sup>75</sup>, applying the Greek style to Scythian scenes and representations. In the course of time, many pieces were also made by "barbarian" craftsmen after learning from them. Vases have been found signed with foreign names such as "Lidos" or "Scythians", who may have worked as meteciens or slaves in these colonies<sup>76</sup>.

Several classical authors considered the Tanais River<sup>77</sup> to be the border between Europe and Asia (Str. 9. 1, 5; Plin. *NH.* 4. 78; 5. 47), and when the Greeks explored the far shore of the Cimmerian Bosphorus, they decided to establish their most remote colony there, at the mouth of the Don River, also called Tanais (Taganrog<sup>78</sup>), between 660-630 BC. Ceramic remains

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<sup>71</sup> This new colony did not improve relations with the Scythians settled in Crimea. (KOSHELENKO, KRUGLIKOVA, DOLGORUKOV 1984, 16).

<sup>72</sup> HANSEN, NIELSEN 2004, 945. Panticapea and Hermonasa are considered to be the most ancient. (TSETSKHLADZE 1998, 44-49, 55-57).

<sup>73</sup> Black-figured vases found in the necropolises of Panticapea during the Archaic period were very rare, as in many other colonies in Pontus, but many red-figured vases appeared in the same contexts during the Classical period, perhaps due to their consolidation as trading centres. (ROSTOWZEW 1993, 171).

<sup>74</sup> KOROMILA 1991, 139.

<sup>75</sup> SCHAPIRO 1936, 10-12.

<sup>76</sup> COHEN 2000, 13.

<sup>77</sup> Ps. Plutarch (*Fluv.* 14) states that the river Tanais was formerly called Amazonio, but was named after the son of the Amazon queen Lysipe who threw himself into it. Servius (C. A. 11. 659) suggests that the Amazons lived near the river Tanais rather than near the river Thermodon.

<sup>78</sup> Supposedly, the Amazons who joined the Scythians in founding the Sauromathian people landed near this settlement. Hdt. 4. 20.

similar to those found in Scythian kurgans between the Don and the Kagalnik (near Lake Meotis<sup>79</sup>) have been found there<sup>80</sup>. However, the discovery of Greek pottery at present-day Krivoroshie, 400 km upstream, dated to the 7th century BC, could indicate the earlier existence of a temporary<sup>81</sup> but very important trading post at Tanais<sup>82</sup>, which was destroyed by the Scythians in the third quarter of the 6th century BC<sup>83</sup>, before being reoccupied and becoming permanent. This is evidence of the importance of this region, which was exploited not only for its natural wealth around Lake Meotis, but also as a frontier between two continents, which for centuries was the last stop on the northern silk route.

This region is also important for our analysis, since several classical authors noted that after the abduction of Antiope by Theseus, the Amazons had to cross the Cimmerian Bosphorus on their way to Athens (D. S. 4. 28). In this adventure, some of these sources point out that they needed the help of the Scythians, who were already present in this region in the Bronze Age. This is not possible on the basis of the chronology of Scythian settlement north of Pontus.

The Thaurids were known to the Greeks long before this colonisation process took place. The protagonists of the first voyages that reached the area reported that the region had been occupied by the Cimmerians<sup>84</sup> before the Scythians, until they expelled them shortly before the arrival of the Hellenes. They were also a nomadic people of warriors on horseback, who must have migrated towards the Caucasus in the first half of the 7th century BC (using the route known as the Caspian Corridor, the only one linking the northern steppes with the Near East -Khol, 2007, 65), in the direction of Anatolia<sup>85</sup>.

We know that on their arrival they sacked several important cities, including Sardis (Hdt. 1. 15), very close to Miletus. It is possible that these actions partially triggered the beginning of the Milesian colonial interest<sup>86</sup>, since some of their colonies were founded after this episode (such as Istros). This evidence would refute the view of Ehrhardt<sup>87</sup>, who argues for a

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<sup>79</sup> SCHILTZ 2001, 41.

<sup>80</sup> From the 4th century BC, coming from Chios, Samos, Thasos, Lesbos, etc. We even know of Punic imports from North Africa.

(SCHILTZ 2001, 102).

<sup>81</sup> More than 5,000 pottery fragments of all kinds have been found there. (KOPYLOV 2000, 68).

<sup>82</sup> KOROMILA 1991, 143.

<sup>83</sup> KOPYLOV, LARENOK (1998, 107-114). The same would have been true of other commercial centres such as Kepoi, Myrmekion and Porthmeion, whose archaeological remains show a layer of destruction at the same time. (KUZNETSOV 1992, 32, 42; VAKHTINA, 1995, 32-33; VINOGRADOV, 1999, 288). Not only in that region, but also in the lower Dnieper area, settlements such as Yagorlytskoe, all of which showed the first signs of defensive structures of the colonisation process. (RUBAN 1983, 289; VINOGRADOV, FONYAKOV, 2000, 96).

<sup>84</sup> SANCHEZ SANZ 2021, 6.

<sup>85</sup> IVANTCHIK 2001, 308.

<sup>86</sup> AVRAM 2003, 284.

<sup>87</sup> EHRHARDT 1983, 20.

period between 680-650 BC when the same Cimmerian threat would have temporarily halted their colonial urge, and which Graham disputes<sup>88</sup>. It cannot be ruled out, however, that not only the Cimmerian threat, but also the immediate campaign which the Lydian king Giges launched against the western Ionian cities after their expulsion, may have contributed to, or been the real cause of, this colonial zeal<sup>89</sup>. Although he failed to take Miletus or Smyrna, other cities such as Colophon were unable to resist (Hdt. 1. 14). What is interesting about this process is that the Milesians sought a new homeland along the Pontic coast, which included the very place of origin of the Cimmerians. Perhaps they thought it had been abandoned, or perhaps they simply did not know exactly where they had come from.

The Caucasus was a natural barrier separating the Middle East from the Eurasian steppes, stretching between Pontus and the Caspian Sea, and its westernmost spur was very close to the Taman peninsula. But even such a mythical mountain range could not stop settlers from looking for new places to settle. On the northeastern coast of Pontus, they founded Pythios (now Adler) and then Dioscorias in the mid-6th century BC, very close to the mythical place where, according to mythology, Prometheus was chained to the Great Caucasus by his father Zeus. The same Greek imports arrived there as in the rest of Pontus, especially pottery from Miletus, Chios, Samos, Clazomene, etc., at an early stage, and later from other centres such as Athens itself.

Trade routes grew, both with regions outside Pontus and between the colonies themselves and the indigenous peoples. There was nothing mysterious left in Pontus. Even imitations of pieces made in the metropolis, either by locals or by settlers from the metropolis, were soon produced in these settlements or in nearby places because of the high demand<sup>90</sup>. This sometimes makes it difficult to know whether they were made there or imported, and in what proportion. In any case, these objects were always in the hands of the local elite. Abundant Clazomenian pottery has been found in the area bordering the Sea of Azov since the early 6th century BC and will appear in other colonies as distant and important as Naucratis.

The entire Pontic coastline was completely colonised and controlled by the Greeks within a century. From the first settlements on the Propontide (8th century BC) to the site of the punishment of Prometheus, some 3,500 km of barely explored and previously uninhabited coastline was continuously settled by colonists who transformed the inhospitable sea into Euxinus Pontus. Little is known about the initial relations and interactions between the Greek settlers and these peoples beyond the settlements in their *chora*, apart from the fact that many of them came to live and work within the walls. This situation contradicts theories that

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<sup>88</sup> GRAHAM 1987, 124-129.

<sup>89</sup> SOLOVYOV 2015, 57.

<sup>90</sup> This kind of elements, as well as many others, show Herodotus' mistake (4. 75-80) when he states that the Scythians were reluctant to adopt customs, etc. of other peoples.

argue for a completely separate form of interaction between the two groups in these places, or even make the Greeks importers of cultural traits, but never recipients of them<sup>91</sup>. Apart from the importance of these sites for the knowledge of the nomads of the western Eurasian steppe and their interactions with the Greeks, an interesting aspect of this process concerns the predominance of female cults in the eastern and northern colonies of Pontus<sup>92</sup>.

Jacobson explains this by pointing out that they existed there before the Greeks arrived, and the Greeks would have adapted these foreign deities to their pantheon in order to maintain their cult<sup>93</sup>. Many of them were associated with agriculture/fertility (such as Demeter or Cybele), but others had other aspects through deities such as Aphrodite, Artemis, etc. Archaeology has made it possible to recover many figurines dedicated to them, as well as the existence of temples dedicated in these colonies, which authors such as Jacobson associate with female Scythian cults related to the goddesses Tabiti or Argimpasa<sup>94</sup>. It is difficult to accept this suggestion, since many of these colonies are not in Scythian territory, but it is interesting that the Greeks themselves decided to assimilate these female deities and continue their cult over and above their main gods, who formed a patriarchal pantheon. We can assume that this was an attempt to syncretise the religious sphere in order to favour relations with the indigenous inhabitants of these regions, thus favouring their survival as settlers and their commercial development, but it also reflects a predominance of female cults in those regions associated with the Amazon universe, which could be linked to the importance of the feminine in these nomadic peoples (at least in this period).

The study of the burials of the nomadic cultures of the Archaic and Classical periods is of interest to us because many of them contain important elements, not only in terms of knowledge of the social role of women in these cultures, but also as containers of pieces that include Amazon representations in their trousseau. Likewise, the interactions between these peoples and the ancient colonies, as generators of these elements, are equally important in explaining their existence. The funeral rites of the Greek immigrants in Pontus included both cremation and inhumation<sup>95</sup>. The former was used only for adults and was more common in the western and northern colonies<sup>96</sup>. However, the basic burial rite in mainland Greece was

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<sup>91</sup> Herodotus (3. 99-100) notes that many Greeks and barbarians maintained their ancestral religious traditions despite this interaction.

<sup>92</sup> BURKERT 1985, 176-179; BERGER 1985, 5-23; JACOBSON 1993, 214-229.

<sup>93</sup> JACOBSON 1995, 57.

<sup>94</sup> JACOBSON 1995, 57-58.

<sup>95</sup> KURTZ, BOARDMAN (1971, 329). Herodotus (5. 8) notes that among the Thracian aristocracy both practices were also used interchangeably. An example of this can be seen in the Rhodian burials studied at Ialysos. (GATES 1983, 19).

<sup>96</sup> Lungu 2015, 51. More than 20% of the graves studied in Berazan were cremations (LAPIN 1966, 120-121). Although later excavations reduced this figure to 15% between the 5th-4th c. BC (Gorbunova 1969, 20-25). However, in other Pontus colonies, such as Tomis, the figure rises to 70% and in Orgame to 96% (LUNGU 2015, 52).

inhumation<sup>97</sup>, as was the case during much of the Mycenaean period<sup>98</sup> or in Hittite Anatolia in the 14th century BC, where cremation was reserved only for rulers<sup>99</sup>.

The use of cremation in settlements during the Greek colonisation period has been attributed to the presence of indigenous elements in these communities, who would have practised cremation<sup>100</sup>. Their rich grave goods have been associated with the elite<sup>101</sup>, which would indicate the existence of mixed settlements. However, this is not always the case, as the Scythians practised burial in northern Pontus, as shown by the study of more than 3,000 tombs throughout their territory<sup>102</sup>, dated between the Archaic and Hellenistic periods. We do not know the reasons for this, as it could have been either an attempt to distinguish themselves from the indigenous population in terms of burial practices, or the survival of this type of rite, which was common on the coast of Asia Minor, where it was practised by the Hellenes in the colonising metropolises.

Some authors point out that the reasons for this choice must have been different in each of these places<sup>103</sup>. In Phrygia, burial was replaced by cremation only because of the increasing influence of the Eastern Greeks, but in Pontus the situation was reversed. This could be an indication that the main burial ritual of the Eastern Greeks was cremation, so that the colonies of Pontus, in contact with cultures where burial was predominant, adopted this custom or kept their own, depending on the influence or closer relationship they had with the native populations, using one or the other system in relation to a personal choice of the deceased<sup>104</sup>.

The importance of the burial rituals of the eastern Greeks in the early western colonies of Pontus was to be maintained over a long period. Initially they had a higher percentage of cremations (as at Orgame and Istros), although they declined in importance in the later northern foundations, perhaps due to the influence of the rituals of the indigenous peoples (Scythians)<sup>105</sup>. It would be more difficult to point to the Thracians as the promoters of such a change, since it was not so pronounced on the western coast, where they practised both<sup>106</sup>. Even among the Getae tribe (Hdt. 4. 93), who occupied the coastal region of Pontus and with whom the colonist settlements had the most contact, cremation predominated.

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<sup>97</sup> HANFMANN 1963, 55.

<sup>98</sup> However, cremation became very important in the later periods. Nilsson (1950, 350) points out that the burning of the body and the offerings was done simultaneously in the search for its complete destruction and the rite was inspired by the burning of offerings to the gods (Hdt. 6. 38; Paus. 2. 20).

<sup>99</sup> RIIS 1948, 41.

<sup>100</sup> SKUDNOVA 1988, 36-172; BESSONOVA 1991, 92-99; VINOGRADOV, KRYZIIKIJ 1995, 122-126.

<sup>101</sup> GRACH 1999, 323.

<sup>102</sup> SKORYI 1996, 40; CHERNENKO 1994, 45-53.

<sup>103</sup> ROOSEVELT 2003, 123.

<sup>104</sup> LUNGU 2015, 52.

<sup>105</sup> As is the case in Berezan (TREISTER 1999, 13).

<sup>106</sup> GERGOVA 1986, 233.

Curiously, Thucydides (2. 52; 6. 71) associates the practice of cremation with epidemics or military invasions, and this is defended by Cawkwell in order to attribute the Greek colonisation of Pontus to possible pandemics or climatic changes rather than to problems of overpopulation<sup>107</sup>. Be that as it may, the use of tumuli for both types of burial was widespread in these regions, especially in Pontus from the beginning of the colonial period, and millennia earlier in indigenous societies<sup>108</sup>, as well as in the vast majority of Eurasian nomadic cultures from the Danube to Manchuria. Its spread among the Greeks may have been related to the influence of these cultures.

The cult of the founder-hero is attested in many of these colonies, as well as in classical mythical accounts. Before the Archaic period, however, there seems to have been little record of this practice<sup>109</sup>, so its development may have been inextricably linked to the process of colonisation<sup>110</sup>. In this way, journeys to distant places became mythical tales that, despite their existence, gave legitimacy to the metropolis and its settlers, affirmed their identity as a group and ensured their survival<sup>111</sup>, since for many people the myths were based on real events. This legitimation was necessary in the case of colonial settlements such as the *apoikias*, since they had not only an economic but also a political organisational structure<sup>112</sup>. The prior appointment of an *oikistes*<sup>113</sup> may have served to give him a prominent role in this structure, distinguishing him from the agrarian *klerukias* and the more commercial *emporion*<sup>114</sup>.

With regard to pottery, we know that it was one of the most important objects of import and trade in Pontus, including pieces decorated with Amazon iconography. The black-figure technique appeared in Greece at the beginning of the 6th century BC<sup>115</sup> and became an important new visual media<sup>116</sup>. Mythological and ritual themes were prominent in this type of work, as well as scenes from everyday life<sup>117</sup>. These works formed an important part of the exports from the Greek producing cities to the colonial world in general and to Pontus in particular. A large number of examples have been found in different places that show this

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<sup>107</sup> CAWKWELL 1992, 302.

<sup>108</sup> SUMMERS 1995, 172.

<sup>109</sup> ANTONACCIO 1995, 197.

<sup>110</sup> As is the case in Orgame (LUNGU 2015, 55).

<sup>111</sup> BURKERT 1985, 191.

<sup>112</sup> PETROPOULOS 2005, 84.

<sup>113</sup> WILSON 1997, 205-206.

<sup>114</sup> TSETSKHLADZE 1998, 21.

<sup>115</sup> SOLOVYOV 2015, 75.

<sup>116</sup> MIRZOEFF 1998, 48.

<sup>117</sup> The case of the heroic scenes in the Archaic Period is different, as these did not refer to specific historical events but alluded to the heroic past, although the weapons or panoply may have been adapted to the moment of execution, which evidences the absence of representations of the hoplite phalanx (LISSARRAGUE 1990, 12; IVANTCHIK 2007, 101).



wide range of iconographic motifs. Some of them, such as animals or fantastic creatures, are associated with memories of the earlier Orientalising period, which would have lasted until the Archaic period<sup>118</sup>.

The reason for the appearance of these elements can be found both in the fact that they are associated with mythical stories that would have been represented in these works, and in the recent proposal by Mayor, who makes them out to be imaginary reconstructions that the Greeks would have made when they discovered fossil remains of animals that were already extinct, such as the great dinosaurs<sup>119</sup>. Some of these animals were of the most common type, such as dogs, which appear frequently in Amazon iconography<sup>120</sup>, but also other creatures such as gorgons or griffins. A wide variety of references to Greek heroes and gods not only appeared permanently in the iconography of Greek vases, but were also widely exported.

The myths of the Amazons appear on many vessels in the colonial archaeological record, not only in the context of Pontus, and in a much greater quantity than decorated pieces with representations relating exclusively to the life of Greek women, among the numerous scenes of Greek daily life. Works of this type have been found in Berezan<sup>121</sup>, Olbia, etc., together with other interesting elements that would become common in Scythian burials. Among these we can highlight several types of bronze mirrors associated with the female context. However, several authors argue that these are not typical of Greek trade, although they show similarities to some of the objects discovered in the Peloponnese<sup>122</sup> in the second half of the 6th century BC. This is due to the similarity of the decoration on their handles, so it is possible that they were objects made in the colonial environment itself for the Scythian elite<sup>123</sup>, using them as a model, since they began to appear in the 5th century BC.

## 5. Conclusion

<sup>118</sup> SOLOVYOV 2015, 75.

<sup>119</sup> MAYOR 2000, 128; BOARDMAN 2002, 33-43.

<sup>120</sup> Dogs and horses became an important element of the funerary ritual. Remains of many of them have been found in different tombs of steppe peoples. Perhaps their importance derives from the support they provided in important activities such as hunting or herding, as well as their role in the religious sphere through their figure as wolves. We know of their relationship with these societies from the Tripole-Kukuteni culture, when they were already part of many human burials and were sometimes deposited alone on top of hills. Dog tusks have even been found prepared as amulets (RYBAKOV 1981, 244).

<sup>121</sup> These include a tondo executed on a Siana goblet (B348) attributed to Painter C and another goblet (B302). (SOLOVYOV 2015, 81; SKUDNOVA 1955, 36). Some authors even speak of the "kerch style" developed in Olbia from 370 BC to produce an enormous quantity of ceramic pieces destined for export (including nearby areas such as the Bosphorus Kingdom), among which Amazon representations, griffomachias, etc., stand out. (SCHILTZ 2001, 114). However, these types of objects were not exclusive to Kerch, as reliefs, vases, etc. depicting Amazonomachias have also been found in other colonial centres (DAUMAS 2009, 111).

<sup>122</sup> At Argos (WALDSTEIN 1902, 264).

<sup>123</sup> This could happen in the workshops located in Olbia (PHARMAKOVSKII 1914, 13; BILIMOVICH 1976, 40), Berazan (DOMANSKII MARCHENKO 2004, 23-28) or in other colonies in Pontus (STUDNICZKA 1919, 7-8; FILOW 1934, 226).

Recently, there has been a widespread belief that Amazon stories in the Hellenistic mythic imaginary emerged from the colonial process that the Greeks undertook in Pontus from the 6th century BC onwards. Specifically, this theory suggests that the frequent allusions to Scythian culture in some Amazon tales, and the apparently elevated status of women in this type of nomadic steppe culture of Indo-Iranian origin, created in the minds of the Greek colonists an image of a warrior woman that would be immortalised and used as part of the tradition. From then on, Amazon stories would flood the Hellenistic iconographic panorama in all known media (vase paintings, reliefs, mosaics, engravings, sculptures, paintings, etc.). However, we must not forget that the first contact between the Greeks and the Scythians could not have taken place before the latter settled in the western regions of the Eurasian steppe and the Hellenes themselves established their first colonies in northern Pontus towards the end of the 7th century BC, while the first pieces decorated with Amazon scenes and the first stories alluding to their mythical tradition date back much earlier.

This situation would be enough to refute these opinions, since Homer himself mentions Amazons three times in the *Iliad*, when he refers to Priam's youth, in connection with the myth of Bellerophon<sup>124</sup> and in his reference to the Amazon queen Myrina. Undoubtedly, the contacts between the Hellenes and the Scythians, as well as the impact of learning about a culture in which women must have played some kind of military role, or at least in many respects a role far superior to that of their counterparts in Greece, came as such a surprise to the Hellenes, came as such a surprise to the Hellenes that they began to include allusions to this culture as part of the development of the Amazon myths throughout antiquity<sup>125</sup>, as is the case with the account of the rise of the Sauromathian people in Herodotus, or the mentions of several classical authors who place the Amazon kingdom to the north of Pontus (Ps. Plu. *Fluv.* 15; D. S. 2. 45-46; E. *Ion* 1140-1150; Str. 11. 5. 3; Plin. *NH.* 6. 35) and not to the south, as the traditional version would have it. However, to deduce from this the discovery of the Amazon myths is very different and lacks logic on the basis of the existing sources<sup>126</sup>.

The stories of the Amazons originated in earlier times, long before the Archaic period, for it is enough to think that Homer himself did not feel the need to add explanations to his mentions of these warrior women, since the public must have been too familiar with his legends for that to be necessary. Moreover, on the basis of our present knowledge, it is difficult to establish a clear date for their appearance, perhaps in Mycenaean times, but never associated with the nomadic steppe peoples of northern Pontus, for when the first Achaean navigators sailed their waters, the Scythians were still inhabiting their original homeland, perhaps in Central Asia or Siberia.

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<sup>124</sup> SANCHEZ SANZ 2019b, 40.

<sup>125</sup> SANCHEZ SANZ 2024a, 81.

<sup>126</sup> SANCHEZ SANZ 2014, 36.

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