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The Phenomenon of Burying Women with Weapons in Iron Age Poland: Tactical, social and funerary considerations

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Abstract

Aim. This article focuses on the phenomenon of military items buried with individuals anthropologically identified as female. While the body of sources informing the analysis of this archaeological phenomenon have already been presented in a separate article [Bochnak 2010], this publication will discuss the possible lines of interpretation for such finds and attempt to explain them. Is the presence of military items in the graves of women enough to posit that warrior-women did exist in the Iron Age? Or perhaps, should it perhaps be viewed as an expression of other customs, not necessarily indicative of women actually wielding arms, barring exceptional cases?

Methods. The article discusses both ancient and early mediaeval written sources mentioning women taking part in combat in the context of Central Europe [Cassius Dio, *Vita Aureliani*, Jordanes, *Getica*, Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae*, Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum* and *Liutprandi Leges*]. It is possible that at least some of these mentions pertain to extraordinary situations requiring all members of a local community capable of bearing arms to fight. For the Germanic peoples, the idea of armed women would not have been improper or offensive. The figure of the Valkyries – the fierce mythical daughters of Odin – should be testament enough. Nevertheless, all the above sources speak of territories which were either close to the borders of the Roman Empire or the location of which are not strictly defined. Sadly, we do not possess any similar sources confirming the existence of female fighters north of the Carpathians in the younger pre-Roman and Roman period.

To demonstrate warrior women did exist, we first need to consider the social implications of the phenomenon, as well as the tactical advantages this may have entailed. Accounts of female warriors mainly describe communities which preferred ranged weapons over hand-to-hand combat, as was often the case among nomadic peoples. Cavalry formations were especially common in the steppes of Eurasia or America but both Central and Western Europe lacked the swathes of open space for such tactics to take hold. While the Germanic social order did allow women to assume prestigious functions, for example as envoys, it does not necessarily follow that these women would have enjoyed the privilege of carrying arms.

Results & Conclusions. It seems more likely that the weapons discovered in graves did not belong to the deceased as such but were a form of funerary offerings or gifts. They may have served a magical purpose of some sort or were perhaps an expression of respect for the buried women. And even though women of the Przeworsk culture may have occasionally participated in armed combat, there is little evidence that they may be called warrior-women in the proper sense.

The presence of weaponry is used in archaeology to establish the gender of cremated individuals and is commonly considered an indicator of male burials. However, past anthropological research has also shown occasional examples of military equipment being found amongst grave goods recovered from female burials. During the Iron Age, from the turn of the 2nd century BC, up until the beginning of 5th century AD, the central and southern territories of present Poland saw the development of a

culture known as Przeworsk. This new culture belonged to a broader system of cultures which emerged locally from the Central-European *Barbaricum* under La Tène influence. To date, about 62-63 graves of women containing weaponry have been found within known Przeworsk culture complexes (including 7 burials of women with infants). However, in ten of the above cases, spurs were the only piece of military equipment recovered from the graves [Bochnak 2010]. It has subsequently been shown

that the phenomenon was most widespread in Mazovia, mainly during the early Roman period (phase B) and during the intermediate phases between early and later Roman period – i.e. approximately during the first two centuries AD. This may be because the early Roman period Przeworsk burials are particularly rich in grave goods with weapons being a fairly common element of the funerary ritual at the time. It is also worth noting that the apparent differences in the distribution of female burials containing weapons dated to the younger pre-Roman and Roman period observed in the territories of present Poland allow us to rule out the possibility of error in determining the sex of buried individuals through anthropological analysis. In other words, we can assume that had the method been wrong, the error would apply to the entire Przeworsk culture material, producing a uniform percentage of female graves containing weapons [Bochnak 2010].

The subject matter of this discussion will not be the weaponry discovered in the Iron Age female graves known from the territories of Poland. Instead, it will examine those cases of burials with weapons where the deceased have been anthropologically determined as female in order to discuss the phenomenon itself. The body of sources informing the analysis of this archaeological phenomenon had been presented in a separate article [Bochnak 2010]. Here, our focus will fall on explaining and understanding such practices. Could these burials confirm the existence of warrior women in the Przeworsk culture? Or perhaps, should it rather be viewed as an expression of other customs, not necessarily indicative of women actually wielding weapons, barring exceptional cases? The scope of our discussion will intentionally be limited to materials of the Przeworsk culture. This is because the aspects of such practices may have varied within different models of settlement or social structures.

Let us first examine the accounts of female warriors from Central Europe found in Antique sources. The *Germania* by Publius Cornelius Tacitus remains our primary written source on the Germanic tribes in the early Roman period, with his other works providing some additional details. While Tacitus does not explicitly mention warrior women, his writings do contain occasional passages discussing the position of women in the Germanic society and describing the role weapons played in marriage rituals. *Germania* is certainly an extraordinary source, but with all of its obvious qualities, it does lean towards the *interpretaatio romana*, that is the Roman perspective on things. As such, it frequently alludes to the Roman world. Scholars have also pointed out many inaccuracies, oversimplifications and anachronisms in Tacitus' work. While Tacitus does not state that Germanic women did wield weapons, some of the fragments we find in his work seem noteworthy. For one, in his description of the Germanic wedding ceremony,

we read that the bride ‘brings her husband some arms’ (*atque in vicem ipsa armorum aliquid viro affert*) [Tacitus, *Germania*, 18]. Unfortunately, the provenance of these ‘arms’ is not stated. We are not told whether they originally belonged to a male relative of the bride. Similarly we do not know if the gift subsequently became property of the husband or was included in the woman's dowry. Could a widowed woman reclaim it? Or maybe this was in fact the weapon which would later be deposited in the widow's grave? We also learn that during the same ceremony, the future husband too presented gifts¹ such as a sword, a *framea* (a polearm), a shield, a horse in harness and oxen. According to Tacitus: ‘The arms which she then receives she must preserve inviolate, and to her sons restore the same, as presents worthy of them, such as their wives may again receive, and still resign to her grandchildren’ [Tacitus, *Germania*, 18]. It seems that the weapons were to be passed to women from the younger generations!² However, we do not know what happened if the woman died childless. Perhaps in such cases the arms were buried with her? The passage is far from unambiguous. Jerzy Kolendo believes that Tacitus' account of the husband bringing the dowry instead of the bride can be read as a Roman interpretation of a bride purchase. Alternatively, it may have been a simple exchange of gifts, as was common in Germanic communities [Kolendo 2008b: 139, 130]. When reading Tacitus, we need also remember that his writings contain a great many references to the Roman world and the passages concerning women are no different. As such, they need to be read as didactic instructions addressed to readers well acquainted with the nuances of the Roman society and politics. Some of the observations found in “*Germania*” are in fact a commentary on the reality of Rome rather than an informative description of the Barbaricum interior. This interpretation of Tacitus' text applies also to the comments he makes about the virtuous Germanic women who abstain from writing love letters. According to J. Kolendo, the passage about the Sitones people being ruled by women is also in fact a reference to the status of women in Rome and a reminder that autocracy inadvertently leads to the loss of liberty for citizens [Kolendo 2008a: 184-186]. Again, Tacitus is often far from being unambiguous. As an example, he mentions that some of the Germanic priests wear women's robes [Tacitus, *Germania*, 43]. However, he does not specify whether these were indeed robes actually worn by Ger-

¹ The text is not clear – at times the gift is intended for the bride's family, at other times for herself.

² The typo-chronological analysis of the archaeological material reveals a fast change pattern of sword forms and thus contradicts Tacitus' statement – the forms changed so quickly that the same item could have been used by two generations at most.

manic women or if they merely resembled them³. It is also unclear whether he meant Germanic women's garments or perhaps Roman clothing.

Other written sources from Antiquity provide scarce information about the existence of warrior women in the Germanic society. One of the most valuable passages is found in Cassius Dio's account of the Marcomannic Wars in which he speaks of the aftermath of a skirmish between Roman and Germanic forces. According to Dio, when the fighting was done, the legionnaires discovered bodies of women amongst the fallen enemies [Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, 71, 3]. In *Vita Aureliani*, we read that the Aurelianus' triumphal procession included Gothic women bearing arms [Flavius Vopiscus, *Vita Aureliani*, 34]. However, considering the polyethnic character of the Gothic 'state', it also seems probable that they were actually Sarmatians. Nevertheless, we do know that, even in later times, it was not uncommon for Germanic women to carry weapons. The laws of Liutprand, king of the Lombards, included a penalty for women organising armed (*manu forti*) attacks on travellers. They were to be sentenced to *decalvare*, which probably meant either scalping or cutting off the top of the skull [Liutprandi Leges, VI, 141. (88)].

Younger authors writing about Central Europe, as well as about parts of the Western Europe, mention the fierce Amazons [Jordanes, *Getica*, 44, 51, 55-57, 107, Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae*, IX 2, 64, Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum* I, 15]. Of course, here we are dealing with a topos of distant Barbaric lands which could just as well be an echo of nomadic Sarmatia, or even Scythia. Paul the Deacon himself doubted the veracity of these accounts. In the end, however he concludes: '[F]or I have heard it related by some that the race of these women exists up to the present day in the innermost parts of Germany' [Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum* I, 15]. Certainly, we cannot be sure if the 'innermost parts of Germany' could have also referred to the Vistula drainage basin. The "History of the Lombards" contains another passage related (at least in some way) to armed women. It is the legendary account of the etymology of the very name 'Lombards' [Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum* I, 8]. Jordanes also mentions women bearing arms among the Germanic tribes [Jordanes, *Getica*, 49, 50]. He writes specifically about the Goths, and while the tribe was technically Germanic, their 'state' was characterised by polyethnicity and so Jordanes' account may rather relate to Sarmatian traditions.

Nevertheless, the above sources do confirm that the phenomenon of warrior women was indeed present

³ The Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox cassock could be a good analogy. The cassock may superficially resemble a woman's dress but the differences are obvious and immediately recognisable for members of local communities.

within the Germanic culture for at least a few centuries. It is also worth noting that the Germanic mythology⁴ gave rise to the Valkyries, fierce daughters of Odin who rode wolves or horses into battle and who were tasked with collecting the souls of the gloriously fallen to lead them to Valhalla. Today, modern depictions of Valkyries are strongly romanticised 19th century artistic visions, but we can presume that in the Germanic context of old, the topos of an armed woman would not have been anything indecent, improper or offensive. In other words, ancient Germans would not have been disturbed by an image of an armed woman, even if such a sight was not particularly common.

Interestingly, the female warrior figure was not unheard of in the Roman world, as suggested by the extraordinary find from Brougham (lat. Brocavum) in Cumbria, United Kingdom. In the 1960s, research in Brougham discovered a complex of cremation burials. Some of them were found to contain weapons (sword scabbards), pottery, fragments of bone objects (including ivory) and burnt remains of horses. The custom of burying horses with the dead is considered extremely rare in the funerary traditions of the Ancient Rome. However, it is thought to have been fairly common among the nomadic peoples from the territories near the Black Sea. Additionally, one of the burials at Brougham contained a silver goblet. The cremations were identified as burials of the *numeri*, mounted units of unromanized locals, used for reconnaissance (among other missions). At the time, a British *numerus* would have been recruited from the inhabitants of Noricum, Pannonia and Illyria. The Brougham site however, produced materials identified as imports from Illyria and Thracia. The research conducted in 2004 demonstrated that the individuals buried at Brougham were two females. One aged 20-40 and the other 21-45 [Smith 2004; Mayor 2014: 81, 82]. Furthermore, A. Mayor remarks that during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, Sarmatian *Iazyges* are said to have supplied 8,000 mounted warriors to the emperor. 5,500 of them would later man Hadrian's Wall. The character of the grave goods recorded at the site, as well as the presence of horse remains, indicates that the women had been recruited from the area where ancient Greeks localised the Amazons [Mayor 2014: 82].

Nevertheless, the site at Brougham seems to be an isolated find. Typically, women did not serve in the Roman army or militia, be it in legions, *auxillia* or other military formations. However, surviving records con-

⁴ Very little is known of the beliefs of Germanic peoples from Central Europe. To be exact, we often draw upon Norse Mythology and its sagas in this context. However, these are mostly late medieval texts developed mainly in Iceland. It is difficult to say how relevant the sagas are to the reality of the Central European *Barbaricum* of the first half of 1st millennium AD.

firm that women did sometimes fight in the arenas of the Imperium Romanum [Murray 2003; McCullough 2008; Manas 2011; Miaczewska 2012]. These gladiatrices, or female gladiators, are known to us thanks to Tacitus [Tacitus, *Annals*, XV, 32]. Two of such armed women are depicted on a stone relief from Halicarnassus dated to the 2nd or 3rd century AD. The two gladiators are shown above the inscription: Amazon and Achillia walked free [Murray 2003; McCullough 2008: 199]. More recent studies suggest there may well be another artefact depicting a female gladiator. The bronze statue from the collection of the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe (Museum of Art and Design) in Hamburg shows a woman holding a curved tool. Until just recently, the object was believed to be a strigil and the statue was referred to as woman getting ready for a bath. However, Alfonso Manas points out that bathing women were usually shown naked in Roman art. What is more, he argues that this woman's gaze is directed downwards, as if fixed on defeated foe. According to A. Manas, such a pose is typical for statues of victorious gladiators. The curved object brandished by the woman would be a *sica* – a short sword or large dagger used by ancient Dacians [Manas 2011].

It seems possible that gladiatrix fights were staged as ‘curiosities’ – a popular form of entertainment in Ancient Rome intended to astonish the spectators. The women would likely only fight with each other or with dwarves. Some modern forms of entertainment certainly come to mind in this context. Interestingly, arena games involving ancient gladiatrices, not unlike modern women's wrestling matches, were often fervently criticised by Roman elites (and enthusiastically received by members of the lower classes). In fact, female gladiator fights were banned on several occasions. For instance in 11 AD, the Senate prohibited free women under 20 years old from fighting in the arenas. In 19 AD, the law was made even stricter (the document is known today as the *Tabula Larinas*). Henceforth, both men and women of the senatorial class (including Equites) were prohibited from entering the games under pain of infamia. Women were prohibited from fighting in the arena for the last time in 200 AD. This indirectly suggests that these restrictive laws were not followed very strictly [Ricci 2006:91]. At the same time, we do know of a certain magistrate Hostilianus, who still hosted female fights in Ostia in 3rd century AD [Murray 2003].

It is important to note that we do not possess any written sources confirming the existence of female fighters north of the Carpathians in the younger pre-Roman and Roman period. All of the accounts cited above either relate to territories located close to the Roman borders or are strongly anecdotal. The story of the Marcomannic Wars contains an episode most closely related to the regions of present Poland [Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, 71, 3].

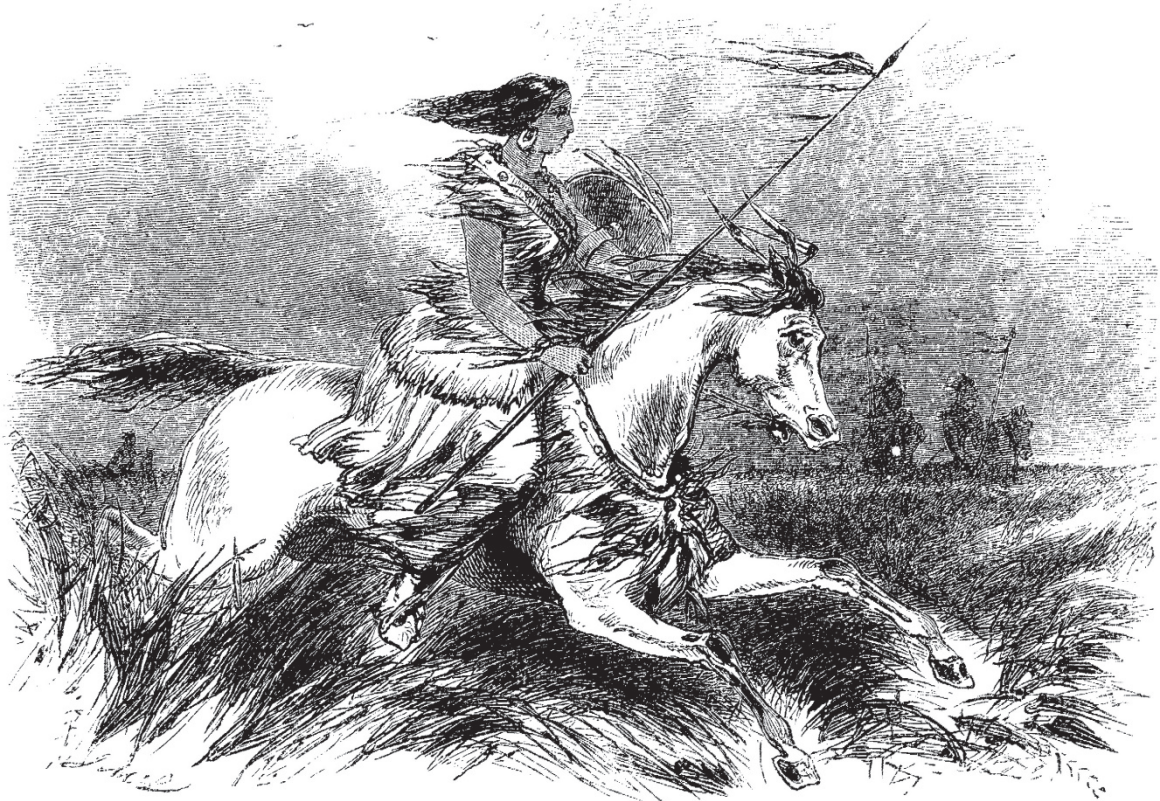
As we can see, written accounts alone are not enough to confirm the existence of warrior women in the Vistula drainage basin. We must therefore use other sources to

determine if the weapons found in Przeworsk culture female burials are indicative of the warrior status of these women. Or whether such finds are merely an expression of other funerary customs, not at all related to women engaging in warfare [barring exceptional circumstances].

In order to prove the existence of warrior women, we must first consider both the tactical and social implications of the phenomenon. On the other hand, if the Przeworsk cultural landscape did not include the warrior woman figure, how should we explain the presence of arms in female burials? In order to contextualise these finds, we need to look for analogies in other cultures from different historical periods [Simniskyte 2007; Berseneva 2012; Gardela 2013]. However, we do recognize that analogy cannot be used as a definitive argument.

First, let us consider whether warrior women would have been tactically valuable. In other words, could female fighters help tip the scales on the battlefield? Ethnographic studies and written sources alike indicate that female participation in battle was common mainly in the communities for whom ranged attacks were the preferred style of combat – as is often the case for nomadic peoples. This hardly seems surprising. While in hand-to-hand combat, male warriors would have generally had an advantage over women, the muscle mass differences become largely irrelevant in ranged combat, where both agility and choice of weapon can just as easily decide the outcome of a fight (especially if one of the parties uses horses and bows). We can easily imagine that in a conflict between two equally populous communities, those able to mobilize more mounted archers will gain a clear advantage. In such cases, the presence of women skilled in archery seems highly desirable. Female archers were common in the Scythian culture and are well attested both in literature [Herodotus, *Histories*, IV, 110-117] and in archaeological research. It has been proposed that the Scythian society included an established group of girls and young women who formed light cavalry troops and their speciality is said to have been archery [Mayor 2014: 82, 83]. Perhaps king Priam's recollections of his youthful and violent encounters with the Amazons, as recounted to Helen of Troy, could be a reference to these Scythian female troops. According to Priam, mounted archers had not been easy to defeat, even though their numbers at Troy were largely inferior to Achaean [Homer, *Illiad*, III, 187-188]. The king describes small formations of fierce Amazon women who, despite their small numbers, were able to threaten an army far outnumbering them. The Attic orator Lysias claimed that ‘[t]hey were accounted as men for their high courage, rather than as women for their sex’ [Lysias, *Speeches*, 2 (Funeral Oration), 4].

Hippocrates, for his part, writes of Sarmatian (Sauromatae) women who fought on horseback, throwing javelins at the enemy. They were also said to have their right breasts removed in order to fight with greater ease [Hippocrates, *De Aere*, XVII]. While this account is strictly impossible



PINE LEAF, THE INDIAN HEROINE.

Fig. 1. Scan from *The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth*, edited by Thomas D. Bonner, Harper & Brothers Publishers, New York, 1856, Public domain, Wikimedia commons.

to confirm archaeologically, a noteworthy discovery was made in 2015 near Rostov-on-Don. The site is a 2000 year old burial of a Sarmatian woman, containing more than a thousand arrows, a harness and an unfinished sword [https://www.haaretz.com/jewish/archaeology/1.682980, access31/09/2017]. We also know that during the Migration Period, bodies of women were frequently found on battlefields following clashes with the Huns [Pohl, 2006: 170]. Procopius of Caesarea also mentions the Hun warrior women [History of the Wars, 8.3.10].

Female warrior figures are also known from the drastically different cultures of the indigenous North American nomads (Fig. 1). A warrior-woman of the Crow Nation (Absaroka or Apsaalooke) known as Pine Leaf won the counting coup four times in her youth. (The counting coup was a feat awarding the highest prestige to a warrior and was won by touching the enemy in battle). Pine Leaf, also referred to as Woman Chief, was regarded as a great warrior and had the honour of sitting in the Council of Chiefs. She was her tribe's war leader and had herself taken two wives [Roscoe 1988:68, 69]. Another woman, Running Eagle became a warrior of the Blackfeet Nation (Piegan tribe) when her husband died in battle. Her heroism won her the respect of her tribe who later followed her on many successful raiding expeditions onto the Great Plains and west of the Rocky Mountains [Schultz 1919].

Unlike nomadic peoples, sedentary cultures tend to develop a much stricter social division into male and female roles [Czopek 1993:44, 45]. Accounts of warrior women in these societies are infrequent. Women were only occasionally involved in combat and such instances were mostly limited to defensive situations in which all able to fight were expected to do so. Such was the case of the Greek women who fought against the Gauls in 279 BC or defended Aetolia against the forces of Pyrrhus in 272 BC. In fact, the king of Epirus reportedly died in Argos, hit and stunned by a tile thrown from a rooftop by an old woman who feared for the life of her son – one of the city defenders [Swiderek 1967: 174-175].

Plutarch's account of the battle of Aquae Sextiae in 102 BC also falls in the defensive category. When Roman legionnaires broke into the Germanic camp, the women of the Cimbri reportedly met them with swords and axes [Plutarch, Parallel Lives, The Life of Marius, 20, 28]. However, we must not ignore the fact that in this case Plutarch wrote about events which had taken place over two centuries prior. Appian of Alexandria described women of the Celtic Bracari tribe, who fought against the army of Sextus Iunius Brutus [Appian of Alexandria, The Spanish Wars, VI, 72]. Ammianus Marcellinus also mentions Celtic women who fight at the side of their husbands, dealing mighty blows as if missiles from a catapult [Ammianus Marcellinus, Res Gestæ, XV, 12].



Fig. 2. Veteran Dahomey Amazons at the annual meeting in Abomey in 1908. © Edmond Fortier / WikiCommons.

The motif of warrior women is also found in Celtic Irish literature. While the body of Irish literature was mostly composed in the Middle Ages, the works often include relics of much earlier times. The heroes are often carried into battle in chariots and fight with longswords. The Ulster Cycle includes stories of the valiant queen Medb (Maeve) and her sisters, of queen Aife (Aoife) and her sister, as well as of Scathach – the queen of the Isle of Skye who trained Cuchulainn in martial arts.

In Japan, women of high social status were trained to fight with the *naginata* – a pole weapon resembling the European glaive. These so called *onna-bugeisha* were tasked with fending off attacks on a castle or, if required, commit ritual suicide. In this context, the DNA study of the bodies of warriors discovered at a site associated with the Battle of Senbon Matsubaru (1580 AD) reveals some very interesting facts. It appears that out of the 105 human remains examined, 35 were female. The battle between the forces of Takeda Katsuyori and Hojo Ujinao did not involve a siege but was fought in open field [Suzuki 1989: 25, 37; Turnbull 2010: 6].

Perhaps the most famous female formation were the Dahomean warrior women sometimes called the Dahomey Amazons. For almost two hundred years, the rulers of Dahomey used the all-female regiment to conquer and raid their neighbours, taking hostages and selling them as slaves. In the first half of the 19th century, the Dahomey Amazons numbered 12,000 [Hartmann 1891]. The Dahomean female army operated until the end of the 19th century when the kingdom became a French protectorate (Fig. 2) [Wrangham, Peterson 1999: 135, 136].

It seems that the tactical suitability of female troops to ranged combat remains valid to this day. Two contemporary women come to mind. The Soviet female sniper

Lyudmila Pavlichenko, who by 1942 recorded 309 confirmed kills, including 200 officers and 36 other snipers [<http://www.nowastrategia.org.pl/ludmila-pawliczenko-najgrozniejsza-kobieta-swiata/> access 12.12.2018] and Amina Okuyeva, a Ukrainian-born Chechen doctor who was killed in an attack on the 30th October 2017 near Kiev [<https://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/swiat/1728810,2,zginela-od-kul-karabinu-masznowego-kim-byla-amina-okujewa.read> access 12.12.2018].

Warrior women were not common in the societies known to us (especially those from pre-modern times). It seems that for such figures to arise, certain extraordinary conditions must have first occurred in a community. For one, it must have been socially acceptable for women to engage in warfare. Acceptance aside, their participation must have been subjectively desirable. One of these reasons may have been to gain favour of the gods (or in the very least female participation must not have offended them). Another to gain a simple advantage in battle through increasing the number of warriors. Such conditions typically arise only in societies in which the social and economic activities are not as strictly divided into traditionally male and female roles. Often, these were communities in which women enjoyed considerable autonomy, high social status and performed important duties.

Ancient texts even tell us of some extraordinary commander queens. In 580 BC, Tomyris, queen of the Massagetae defeated Cyrus the Great and plunged his severed head into a vessel of blood [Herodotus, Histories, I, 201-214]. Polyænus, Roman rhetorician, advocate and author of the *Stratagems in War* dedicated to Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus, wrote of the Sarmatian queen Amage, who, in order to defend her people, invaded the

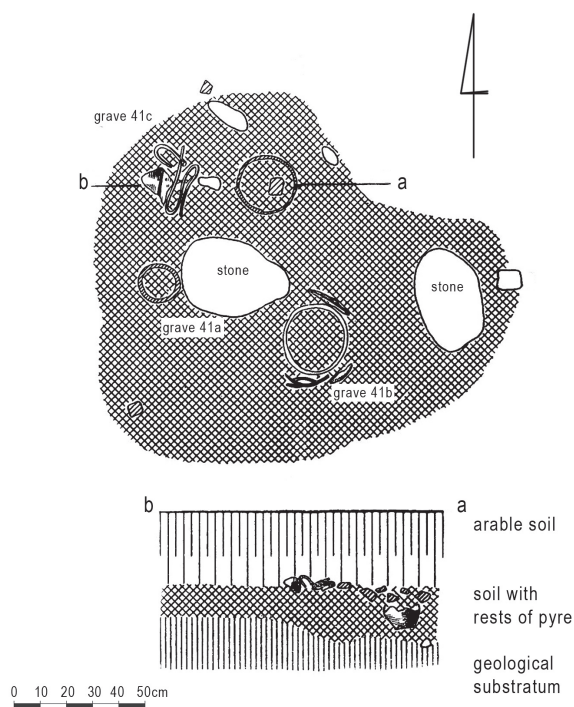


Fig. 3. Korzen, (Plock County) Plan of grave 41. According to A. Kempisty 1968.

Scythians and killed their prince in a duel [Polyaenus, *Stratagems in War*, VIII, 56]. The same Roman author also recounted the story of Rhodogune of Parthia, daughter of Mithridates. According to Polyaenus, Rhodogune vowed not to have her hair dressed until she had subdued the revolt of one of the peoples under her rule. And so she rode into battle and her hair was taken care of after she had won [Polyaenus, *Stratagems in War*, VIII, 28]. When in 272 BC, Pyrrhus of Epirus invaded Sparta, princess Chilonis, daughter of Leotychidas, together with other women, took to the city walls to fight the attackers [Plutarch, *Parallel Lives*, *Life of Pyrrhus*, 26-28].

The warrior-woman tradition was also strong in the British Isles. Mediaeval historian Geoffrey of Monmouth wrote about queen Gwendolen, who defeated her ex-husband in a battle at the River Stour and seized the throne of Britain. These events reportedly took place in the 9th century BC [Geoffrey of Monmouth 1842: 27, 28]. Examples of the legendary Irish warrior queens have been quoted above. Last but not least, let us mention Cartimandua, queen of the Brigantes from the 1st century AD and Boudica, who fought against Roman invasion in the years 60 and 61 AD [Adler 2008; Pettigrew 2013]. The Roman governor of Britain, Gaius Suetonius Paulinus claims that in Boudica's army women outnumbered the men [Tacitus, *Annals*, XIV, 36].

The Gundestrup cauldron found in Jutland could provide a peculiar record of female warrior figures in the Celtic world. The cauldron is a unique artefact with few clear parallels and the scenes depicted on its plates are not easily interpreted. While the object is clearly an import

within the Scandinavian context, its exact origin has been the subject of controversy for over a century. However, two main hypotheses have so far emerged. One traces the cauldron to the Celto-Thracian borderlands, most likely in the lower Danube. The other proposes a Gaulish origin. The base plate of the cauldron is a relief sculpture of a bull, a human figure with a sword and three dogs. The three figures are usually presumed to be in combat. Alternatively, the scene is sometimes described as the taming of the bull. However, the human figure with a sword has proven most interesting to researchers. Some use the term *man*, which in the English language may either mean a 'male' or simply a 'human'. According to others, the figure would clearly be a woman with bare breasts [Megaw 2001: 175; Belard 2015: 24]. Regrettably, the dating and provenance of the artefact are both uncertain, as is its (possibly votive⁵) function. Likewise, the scenes from the cauldron plates have proven difficult to interpret. For these reasons, the female figure seen on the Gundestrup Cauldron base plate medallion cannot be seen as definite proof for the existence of female warriors, be it in the lower Danube or in Gaul.

Women holding positions of power were also present in Germanic societies. For instance, written sources recount the life of the prophetess Veleda and her successor Ganna. Ganna accompanied Masyus, king of the Semnones, on a diplomatic visit to emperor Domitian [Tacitus, *The Histories*, IV, 6; *Germania*, 8; Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, LXVII, 5]. While it is plausible that the function of a seer was reserved exclusively for women, Ganna's participation in the negotiations indicates she enjoyed high social stature and could actively shape the politics of the Semnones [Kolendo 2008a; Kolendo, Plociennik 2015: 195-201].

The above examples and discussion of tactical advantage enjoyed by female warriors both show that warrior women and female war leaders were predominantly found amongst nomads and within communities which did not develop a strict masculine-feminine division of social roles. Furthermore, the female fighter figures belong mostly to societies in which women were able to perform important functions (and not just those traditionally reserved for them such as priestesses)⁶. It

⁵ We have mentioned that the scene is often described as bull hunt or taming. However, the human figure above the animal is seen wielding a sword and wearing spurs on the heels. Such accoutrements are more commonly associated with military activities rather than with hunting. This discrepancy adds to the difficulties experienced by those attempting to decipher the scene.

⁶ Communities which do adhere to strict male-female role divisions at times find themselves faced with the necessity of arming women as well. For instance, in the United Arab Emirates, the personal guard accompanying women who travel without a male spouse or family member must comprise exclusively of female guards. Such a force accompanied Camilla,

seems that the pre-historic Germanic communities did allow women to bear arms in certain situations. On the other hand, as discussed above, female warriors are most useful in ranged combat and as mobile formations. Such perception does not align with the types of weaponry known from Przeworsk culture graves. Female burials recorded in Poland typically contain swords (both single and double edged), shield bosses (of which many are fashioned with spikes useful in offensive combat!), as well as polearm heads. All of these weapons would have been useful primarily in hand-to-hand combat. What is more, the studied burials did not contain any kind of arms which could be seen as more suitable for weaker individuals. In this respect the graves of women and men are no different. Such types of arms would include projectile weapons, e.g. Bows, arrows or sling bullets. While they were of course known in Antiquity and used both in battles and for hunting, projectile weapons are very rarely found in Przeworsk culture complexes [Godłowski 1992: 81; Kontny 2001: 110, 111; Bochnak 2005: 93-96]. It is presumed that while the Przeworsk culture people did use bows for hunting, they did not bury them with their dead. According to B. Kontny, using bows in battle requires specialised bowmen formations and central command. There is no proof that such combat techniques were known to the Przeworsk culture peoples [Kontny 2001: 109-111; 2018: 38, 39]. The lack of projectile weapons in graves is perhaps indicative of the Przeworsk culture military tactics. As far as we are aware, Przeworsk peoples had no specialised skirmisher formations to harass the enemy (such skirmisher troops are not to be confused with the Germanic warriors mentioned by Tacitus, who threw javelins in the early phases of battle). It also seems plausible that such style of combat would have been better adapted to the Central European environment. After all, light cavalry formations

Duchess of Cornwall during her visit to Abu Dhabi in November 2016 [<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3918562/The-women-black-Gun-guards-flank-Camilla-leaves-hotel-visit-Abu-Dhabi-Charles.html> access 12.10.2017]. The Albanian ‘sworn virgins’ are another noteworthy example. Traditional Albanian communities who follow the Kanun strictly forbid women to leave the household on their own, drive cars or make important trade deals. According to this code, women also cannot receive inheritance or vote. However, these restrictions can be lifted in certain cases. Such circumstances include being widowed, broken marriage engagements, lack of male descendants or the right to pursue a family vendetta. Women can then become the *virgjineshe* – sworn virgins. While the *virgjineshe* remain of course biological women, they become men in all social aspects. They take vows of chastity, cut their hair short, wear men’s clothing and are expected to behave as men do. They can then represent their family, remain in the same room with strangers, drink alcohol, wear watches, drive lorries and use arms, also to exact revenge [Young 1998].

are more common in the Eurasian or American plains but are seldom recorded in Western and Central Europe where the terrain lacks such large expanses. Alternatively, the Przeworsk people may have differentiated between weapons worthy of a warrior and those not ‘fit’ for use in funerary rites. The bow and arrow may have belonged to the latter category.

Weaponry as an element of the funerary ritual

Katarzyna Czarnecka identifies three categories of grave goods. The first comprises the private possessions of the deceased – garments, as well as some other gifts such as tools or arms [Czarnecka 1990: 89-91]. Indeed, the weaponry recorded in female burials may have actually belonged to the women in some cases. Some of the goods were ritually destroyed – burned on the funeral pyre and intentionally bent. Swords, spear heads, scissors and sometimes knives are particularly common finds of this kind. The practice could have been founded in the belief that objects too possess a spirit. By so ‘annihilating’ the item, its spirit was released and able to join its owner in the afterlife. Naturally, such customs may have arisen from many different beliefs related to the world of the living or the dead. For example 19th and 20th century Lemkos would bury the dead together with their belongings and other objects associated with the deceased. This was meant to ensure the dead would rest in peace and would not rise to search for his favourite items. This way, the custom in fact protected the living [Kosiek 2011: 221].

The second category of grave goods encompasses offerings such as vessels containing food or other artefacts possibly associated with rituals or laws unknown to us today. The very term ‘offering’ clearly indicates that such finds, although present in graves, did not belong to the dead individuals in life. It seems that some of the military objects may be attributed to this category (for instance, weaponry recorded in double burials of women with small children or the examples of weapons intentionally driven into the walls or bottom of grave pits).

The last category of grave goods comprises remains from funeral feasts. Such ‘wake scraps’ were also sometimes placed in the graves [Czarnecka 1990:90, 91]. This category does not include weapons or armour.

Let us consider another possible explanation for the presence of weapons in burials. Most often, it is presumed that the arms found in Przeworsk culture graves constitute private possessions of the deceased. Nevertheless, it has been demonstrated that in some cases such objects should rather be interpreted as ritual offerings. Weaponry discovered in the graves of infants and young children are a compelling example. Grave no. 30 in Ciecierzyn (Kluczbork County) contained the remains of an infant just a few months old. The grave goods included

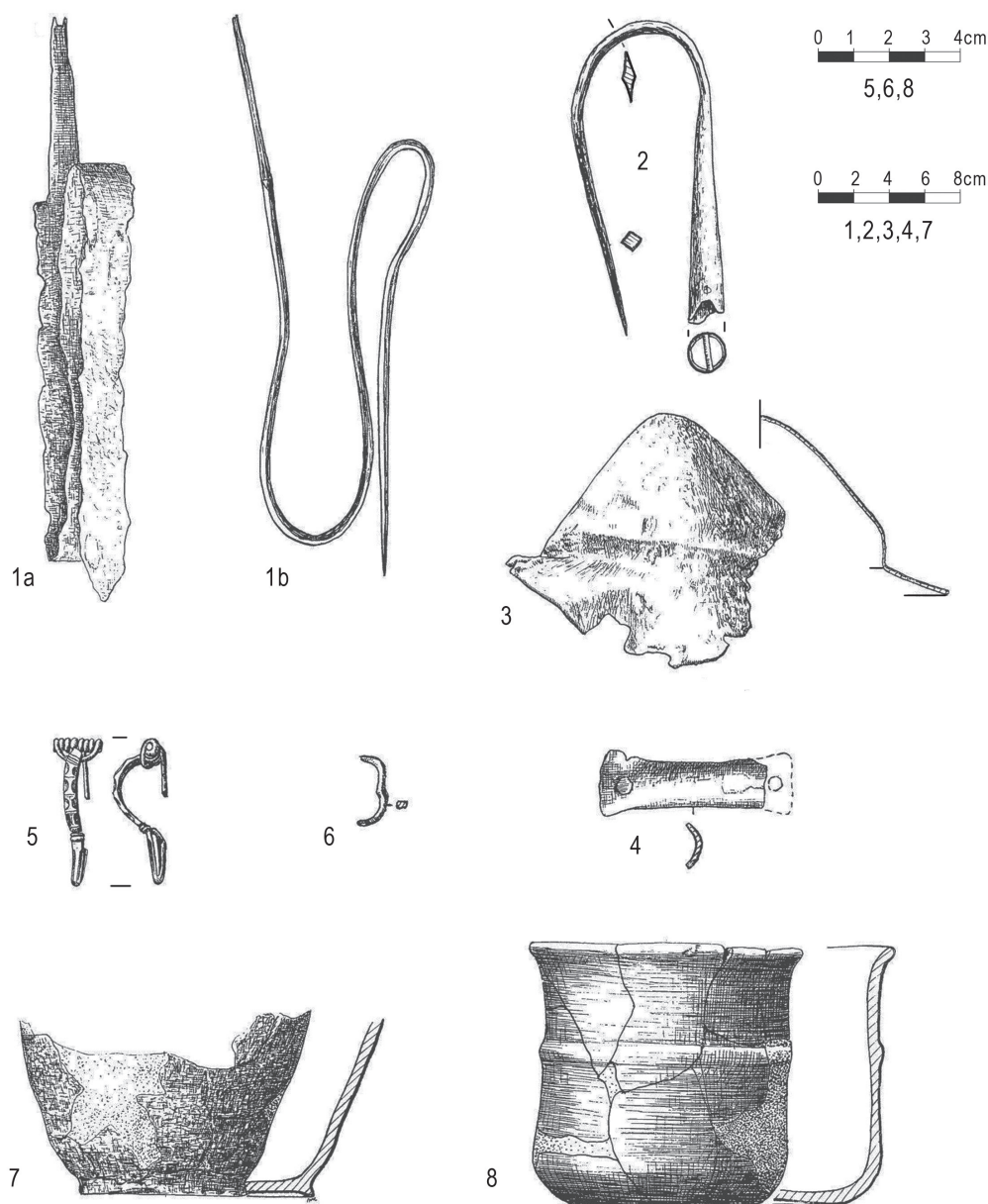


Fig. 4. Korzen, (Plock County). Inventory of grave 41c. According to A. Kempisty 1968.

a sheathed sword, as well as the head and metal butt of a spear or another polearm [Martyniak, Pastwinski, Pazda 1997: 15; Fig. XXXIII:7, XXXIV:1]. 37% of the *Infans I* burials excavated in Ciecierzyn contained military objects. The figure was even higher for *Infans II* burials – 54% [Martyniak, Pastwinski, Pazda 1997: 95]. In Opatow (Klobuck County), grave 1186 contained a silver scabbard chape – also an element of a warriors accoutrements. Anthropological research classed the burial as *Infans I* [Madyda-Legutko, Rodzinska-Nowak, Zagorska-Telega 2011a: 237, 238; 11b: Fig. CCCLXVI: Gr. 1186, 2]. It would certainly be strange to assume that a child of a few years of age actually used the chape as a military object. Holes discovered in the chape suggest it may have been worn on a leather band or string as an amulet. In the above cases, the grave goods were probably buried with the deceased not because the objects

were their private possessions but as gifts which they were entitled to. Perhaps weapons buried with women were exactly that as well: gifts worthy of the dead. We have already discussed weapons in the context of marriage rites. It could be that at least some of the women remained in possession of the equipment until their death, especially if their husbands also died childless?

Grave 41c from Korzen (Plock County) provides another interesting example. The site includes three paved-over burials (Fig. 3). The first marked as 41a, contained the remains of an individual aged 8-18 of unidentified gender since all anthropological and archaeological research attempts remained inconclusive in this respect (grave goods included a piece of molten bronze, a spindle whorl and some pottery). Grave 41b produced the remains of a 20-35 year old male (*Adultus*) (and perhaps a female of 15-17 – *Juvenis*) buried with a sword, a

projectile point a shield boss and grip, a knife, lumps of molten glass and some pottery. Finally, grave 41c contained the remains of a 30-40 year old female (*Maturus*). Near grave pit 41c, the researchers recorded a sword, a polearm head, a shield boss and grip and pottery (Fig. 4). To quote A. Kempisty, *the grave goods could not be associated with any assemblage of skeletal remains and so it should be presumed they did in fact belong to the aforementioned burial* – i.e. grave 41c [Kempisty 1969: 358]. This peculiar location of the finds deposited not within the grave pit but to the side might point to an unusual relationship between the objects and the deceased. Perhaps we are dealing with a gift for the dead? According to Tadeusz Malinowski, women who died in childbirth were treated the same as priests or warriors who fell in battle [Malinowski 1962: 79, 89]. What follows is that such women may have been buried with weapons as well. What is more, the burials we studied for the purpose of this analysis also include graves of women with small children (and sometimes infants). It is tempting to associate them with the customs described by T. Malinowski. Nevertheless, we still lack sufficient evidence to confirm such a hypothesis. For Suchan, weapons buried with women would have symbolised the joining of female attributes with masculine vitality. These symbolic practices would also have linked to a Germanic hermaphroditic deity [Suchan 2008: 285]. However, he does not explain why this custom would have applied only to some burials, at times not particularly rich in grave goods. Liana describes a custom of sinking sharp objects, such as spear heads or knives, into the grave pit. This may have been done as part of the funerary ritual – for instance for protection against the dead woman [Liana 1968; Czarnecka 2013, 167]. Another interpretation also comes to mind. The Greeks of Homer’s time, when taking a vow upon the grave of a fallen comrade would plunge their swords into the soil [Bochnak 2010: 24]. The act of driving sharp objects (including weapons) into grave pits may signify many things but in line with archaeological methodology they belong to the grave goods, regardless of the buried individual’s gender.

In some instances, the military equipment recorded in burials belongs to the defensive category rather than the offensive. For example, grave 270b in Oblin (Garwolin County) contained a shield boss [Czarnecka 2007, 62; Fig. CCXXI : 1]. Similarly, the only military object found at Zdzarow (Sochaczew County) in grave 114 was a shield grip [Nowakowski 2003: 296, 313, 350; Fig. XXIX : 114, 1]. However, such cases are also rare among male burials [Bochnak 2005: 151, 152]. It is then possible that the shields were symbolically placed on the funeral pyre for protection. Another example comes from the traditions of the Khevsureti mountain valleys of north-eastern Georgia. The strong isolation of the Khevsur allowed them to preserve many archaic customs well into the 20th century. In the thirties, they still

practised a particular form of sabre fencing with leaps and kicks and wore chainmail for protection. Khevsur widows would sow fragments of chain onto their garments. This demonstrates how armour can sometimes become an element of female dress [Borawski 2002].

While studying the circumstances in which weaponry was placed in female burials, it is difficult to ignore another, somewhat trivial possibility. The research of cremation pyre sites (*ustrina*) discovered near Przeworsk culture burial ground complexes indicates that not all remains were always carefully transported to the burial site). In addition to the commonly occurring small items and pottery fragments, the *ustrina* also contained some much larger finds. The pyre site in Kuny (Turek County) was even found to contain some military objects: polearm buttheads and shield bosses [Skowron 2005]. What is more, studies of *terra sigillata* wares have confirmed that sherds of a single vessel are at times recorded in different graves [Tyszler 1999: 69]. Most likely, not all fragments were collected after the initial cremation ceremony. Subsequently, the remaining sherds were buried with another individual. We would propose that such objects should also be viewed as funerary gifts or offerings intentionally placed in graves even though they did not belong to the dead individual. It therefore seems plausible that military items abandoned at cremation sites (including arrow heads, spear points or shield bosses) may have been used in subsequent burial ceremonies. If confirmed, this may appear to be a simple explanation for the presence of individual military objects in female graves. And yet, it must not be accepted as the only possible hypothesis. The chronological patters of the phenomenon, as well as the over-representation of complexes dated to the older Roman period in known assemblages strongly suggest otherwise. If all military finds recorded in burials identified as female were to be viewed as ‘incidental’, the phenomenon should be observed with comparable frequency across all phases of the Przeworsk culture settlement.

As presented above, weaponry recorded in female burials may be interpreted as a form of funerary gift or offering related to various contemporary customs. Some of the known examples appear to be deeply rooted in contemporary social reality. However, we also cannot dismiss that the presence of military objects in graves was in fact coincidental.

Conclusion

Antique parallels and ethnographic data alike suggest that female warriors did exist in many different cultures. At the same time, the phenomenon is observed much more frequently in nomadic cultures or societies in which women and men were not strictly separated in terms of social status. The Przeworsk culture peoples favoured sedentism and imposed different social stand-

ards on men and women. At this time, we possess no unequivocal written records confirming the existence of warrior women in the Vistula drainage basin. For this reason, it seems most probable that the infrequent finds of military items in female burials associated with the Przeworsk culture should be attributed to particular funerary customs. The arms would then be gifts offered to these dead women, rather than their private property in life. The example of cremation pyre sites at which some of the grave goods were found points to the possibility that some of the military objects were placed in female graves in error, as a result of accidental combining of the grave goods at the burial ground.

Although women of the Przeworsk culture may have, (and probably did) bore arms and used weapons in some cases, it seems unlikely they were 'warriors' in the proper sense.

Translated by Jan Skorupka

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Fenomen składania broni do grobów kobiecych w epoce żelaza na ziemiach polskich w świetle uwarunkowań taktycznych i społecznych oraz zwyczajów pogrzebowych

Słowa kluczowe: archeologia funeralna, broń, kobieta, Kultura Przeworska, epoka żelaza

Streszczenie:

Cel. Tematem artykułu jest fenomen składania militariów do grobów, w których, według wyników analiz antropologicznych, złożono kobiety. Baza źródłowa wraz z archeologiczną analizą tego zjawiska została omówiona w odrębnym artykule [Bochnak 2010]. W niniejszym tekście przedstawiono możliwe interpretacje samej natury tego zjawiska. Czy militaria w grobach kobiecych rzeczywiście mogą być traktowane jako dowód istnienia kobiet-wojowniczek? A może występowanie broni w grobach jest odbiciem innych zwyczajów, a kobiety – poza zupełnie wyjątkowymi przypadkami – nie posługiwały się bronią?

Metoda. W artykule omówiono antyczne i wczesnośredniowieczne źródła pisane wzmiankujące walczące kobiety w Europie Środkowej [Kasjusz Dion, Vita Aureliani, Jordanes, Izydor z Sewilli, Paweł Diakon, oraz *Liutprandi Leges*]. Być może część wzmianek dotyczy wyjątkowych sytuacji, kiedy do boju

stawali wszyscy zdolni do walki członkowie lokalnej społeczności. Dla samych Germanów obraz zbrojnej kobiety nie był czymś nieprzyzwoitym lub bluźnierczym – świadczy o tym koncepcja walkirii – mitologicznych zbrojnych córek Odyna. Tym niemniej, wszystkie wymienione źródła dotyczą terenów bliższych granicom Imperium Romanum lub nie są dokładnie lokalizowane i nie dysponujemy żadnymi źródłami pisanymi potwierdzającymi obecność uzbrojonych kobiet w młodszym okresie przedrzymskim i w okresie wpływów rzymskich na terenach położonych na północ od Karpat.

Aby wykazać istnienie kobiet-wojowniczek należy w pierwszym rzędzie uwzględnić względy taktyczne przemawiającymi za udziałem kobiet w walce oraz uwarunkowania społeczne. Fenomen kobiet-wojowniczek jest spotykany przede wszystkim w społeczeństwach preferujących walkę na dystans – tak jak często ma to miejsce u koczowniców. Formacje konnych jeźdźców są typowe dla obszarów stepowych – Eurazji lub Ameryki, natomiast w Europie Środkowej i Zachodniej, gdzie brak było szerokich, otwartych przestrzeni, taki sposób walki nigdy nie był popularny. Uwarunkowania społeczne u Germanów dopuszczały wysoką pozycję kobiet; były one np. członkiniami poselstw, jednak nie musiało się to łączyć z przywilejem noszenia broni.

Wnioski i podsumowanie. Prawdopodobnie broń w pochówkach kobiet nie była ich własnością prywatną, a została dodana jako dar grobowy. Motywem mogło być zarówno działanie magiczne, jak i przekonanie, że z jakiegoś powodu zmarła jest godna takiego daru. W niektórych przypadkach kobiety kultury przeworskiej mogły doraźnie posługiwać się bronią, lecz nie możemy nazywać ich wojowniczkami.