

Research report - Southern Tunisia 2005

In Search of the Ancient Amazons' Homeland

The destination of this trip was southern Tunisia, specifically the area around the salt lake Chott Djerid, which some scholars think may be Lake Tritonis of antiquity, the famed locale that ancient historians name in association with the North African Amazon tribes. Then we went to the island Djerba where important Neolithic sites have been discovered. Furthermore, we investigated the mountain region round Matmata and Tataouine to get to know the original Berber culture. The Berbers are considered to be the aborigines in this region, and up till now they have preserved structures which indicate that their society had once been matriarchal, that means it was a society predominated by women. From the Middle Ages there are accounts of Berber queens, so of the famous Kahina who had very successfully waged war against the attacking Arabic tribes, and of Tin Hinan, who was the ancestress of the Tuareg. In the mountains north of Tataouine we were able to investigate Stone Age rock paintings.

Ancient tradition

Diodorus (Book III, 52-55) gives following account of the Libyan Amazons:

For the majority of mankind believe that the only Amazons were those who are reported to have dwelt in the neighborhood of the Thermodon river on the Pontus; but the truth is otherwise, since the Amazons of Libya were much earlier in point of time and accomplished notable deeds. Now we are not unaware that to many who read this account the history of this people will appear to be a thing unheard of and entirely strange; for since the race of these Amazons disappeared entirely many generations before the Trojan War, whereas the women about the Thermodon river were in their full vigour a little before that time, it is not without reason that the latter people, who were also better known, should have inherited the fame of the earlier, who are entirely unknown to most men because of the lapse of time. For our part, however, since we find that many early poets and historians, and not a few of the later ones as well, have made mention of them, we shall endeavour to recount their deeds in summary, following the account of Dionysius, who composed a narrative about the Argonauts and Dionysus, and also about many other things which took place in most ancient times. Now there have been in Libya a number of races of women who were warlike and greatly admired for their manly vigour; for instance, tradition tells us of the race of the Gorgons, against whom, as the account is given, Perseus made war, a race distinguished for its valour; for the fact that it was the son of Zeus, the mightiest Greek of his day, who accomplished the campaign against these women, and that this was his greatest Labour may be taken by any man as proof of both the pre-eminence and the power of the women we have mentioned. Furthermore, the manly prowess of those of whom we are now about to write presupposes an amazing pre-eminence when compared with the nature of the women of our day.

We are told, namely, that there was once in the western parts of Libya, on the bounds of the inhabited world, a race which was ruled by women and followed a manner of life unlike that which prevails among us. For it was the custom among them that the women should practise the arts of war and be required to serve in the army for a fixed period, during which time they maintained their virginity; then, when the years of their service in the field had expired, they went in to the men for the procreation of children, but they kept in their hands the

administration of the magistracies and of all the affairs of the state. The men, however, like our married women, spent their days about the house, carrying out the orders which were given them by their wives; and they took no part in military campaigns or in office or in the exercise of free citizenship in the affairs of the community by virtue of which they might become presumptuous and rise up against the women. When their children were born the babies were turned over to the men, who brought them up on milk and such cooked foods as were appropriate to the age of the infants; and if it happened that a girl was born, its breasts were seared that they might not develop at the time of maturity; for they thought that the breasts, as they stood out from the body, were no small hindrance in warfare; and in fact it is because they have been deprived of their breasts that they are called by the Greeks Amazons. As mythology relates, their home was an island which, because it was in the west, was called Hespera, and it lay in the marsh Tritonis. This marsh was near the ocean which surrounds the earth and received its name from a certain river Triton which emptied into it; and this marsh was also near Ethiopia and that mountain by the shore of the ocean which is the highest of those in the vicinity and impinges upon the ocean and is called by the Greeks Atlas. The island mentioned above was of great size and full of fruit-bearing trees of every kind, from which the natives secured their food. It contained also a multitude of flocks and herds, namely, of goats and sheep, from which the possessors received milk and meat for their sustenance; but grain the nation used not at all because the use of this fruit of the earth had not yet been discovered among them. The Amazons, then, the account continues, being a race superior in valour and eager for war, first of all subdued all the cities on the island except the one called Mene, which was considered to be sacred and was inhabited by Ethiopian Ichthyophagi, and was also subject to great eruptions of fire and possessed a multitude of the precious stones which the Greeks call anthrax, sardion, and smaragdus; and after this they subdued many of the neighbouring Libyans and nomad tribes, and founded within the marsh Tritonis a great city which they named Chersonesus after its shape.

... The story is also told that the marsh Tritonis disappeared from sight in the course of an earthquake, when those parts of it which lay towards the ocean were torn asunder.

HERODOTUS, The Histories; Book IV, 168 - 205

From Herodotus we get following information:

Next along the coast are the Machlyes, who also make use of the lotus, but to a lesser extent than the Lotophagi. Their territory reaches to a large river called Triton, which flows into the great lagoon of Tritonis. In the lagoon there is an island named Phla ...

The people next to the Machlyes are the Auses; both these tribes live on the shores of the lagoon, and the river Triton forms the boundary between them. The Machlyes let the hair grow on the back of their heads, the Auses on the front. They hold an annual festival in honour of Athene, at which the girls divide themselves into two groups and fight each other with stones and sticks; they say this rite had come down to them from time immemorial, and by its performance they pay honour to their native deity - which is the same as our Greek Athene. If any girl, during the course of the battle, is fatally injured and dies, they say it is a proof that she is no maiden. Before setting them to fight, they pick out the best-looking girl and dress her up publicly in a full suit of Greek armour and a Corinthian helmet; then they put her in a chariot and drive her round the lagoon. How they dressed these girls before there were Greeks settled in the neighbourhood, I cannot say; presumably the armour they used was Egyptian - for I am prepared to maintain that both shields and helmets were introduced into Greece from Egypt. There is a belief amongst these people that Athene is the daughter of Poseidon and the lake, but that having some quarrel with her father she put herself at the disposal of Zeus, who made her his own

daughter. The women of the tribe are common property; there are no married couples living together, and intercourse is casual - like that of animals. When a child is fully grown, the men hold a meeting, and it is considered to belong to the one it most closely resembles.

Chott Djerid – the legendary Lake Tritonis

Ancient geography:

The ancient knowledge of geography has been handed down to us by Claudios Ptolemaios (2nd century AD). According to him the lake Tritonis named Palus Tritonis is the third of a row of lakes (Palus Pallas, Palus Libya), which are connected with a river Triton. This river empties into the Mediterranean Sea some miles north of Tacapae. Tacapae is identical with the today`s city Gabes. Consequently, the lake Tritonis must be in this salt lake basin which stretches from the Mediterranean Sea at Gabes to the west. We know that still in antiquity the climate in this region was much moister, thus there was much more water, so we have to assume that they were real lakes. Today the salt lakes only fill with water after much rain mostly in winter. According to Ptolemaios the Tritonis was the third lake. Today we distinguish the salt lakes Chott Fedjadj, the large Chott Djerid and then the Chott el Rharsa (also: el Gharsa). Due to this the Chott el Rharsa must be the lake Tritonis. Actually, there is an unambiguous hint. According to Ptolemaios next to the lake Tritonis there is a place named Thusuros, which is undoubtedly identical with the today`s city Tozeur. This town is situated at the Chott Djerid. Thus it is clear, which was always certain in antiquity - that the Chott Djerid is identical with the legendary lake Tritonis. The detail that the Tritonis was the third lake can easily be explained that in the moister period the extended Chott Fedjadj was divided into two basins. Even today there is a special name for the western part of the Chott Fedjadj - Chott Faraoun.

Presumable position of the island Hespera respectively Phla:

Between the salt lake basins of Chott Djerid and Chott el Rharsa there protrudes an extensive elevation from the surrounding landscape. It stretches from Nefta in the west across Tozeur, the main place, to El Hamma du Djerid in the northeast and Degache in the southeast. At Degache there starts the wide basin of the Chott Djerid, at El Hamma the landscape drops into the Chott el Rharsa basin. In fact, this special region is enclosed to the east by a mountain chain named Cherb, to the south and north by the salt lake basins, and in the west at Nefta it ends in the desert. The unity of the region gives the impression of an island. Actually, this landscape is the only inhabited area for many miles around. Therefor the identification of this secluded region with the island Hespera or Phla seems plausible.

In Tozeur, the main place, there exists a distinctive hill, named the Belvedere.



the Belvedere in Tozeur

On top of the hill there is a platform with several outstanding hill formations, and a thermal spring. From this place you have an excellent view over the environs. Actually, it is a place of cultic importance. Also today many people come here because of that reason. Unfortunately, this magical place is destroyed by recent sculptures. Nevertheless, despite of these destructions it is obvious that it is a prehistoric place of worship. The thermal spring perfectly fits into this picture - a Neolithic place of worship in connection with a sacred spring.



the sacred spring at the Belvedere in Tozeur

One of these striking rock formations shows a niche which obviously had been made artificially. Here we were able to discover something exceptional. Mysterious human figures can be discerned at the right side of the entry to this niche. They had been cut into the rock. The figures seem to represent women with long gowns. A very similar rock engraving of a woman I had discovered on the hill of Myrina castle on the Greek island Lemnos which is also connected with the Amazons.



rock with artificial niche and rock engravings

Thus we have a striking parallel to the cultic niches and rock pictures of the Neolithic culture on Lemnos which we associate with its prehistoric matriarchal civilization respectively the Amazons.

Actually, the Belvedere at Tozeur gives clear evidence that it was a place of worship, which already in prehistoric times was of great importance.

Gafsa and the ancient Berber village Djebel Sened

The **Caspian** - the dominant Stone Age culture in North Africa - was named after Gafsa, a city north of the Chott Djerid. Characteristic for that culture are the so-called Escargotières (snail mounds), huge mounds of snail-shells, seashells and burned wood, mostly situated on a hillside with a good view. Herein there is a first amazing parallel to Dundartepe, that site at the Black Sea which is associated with the Thermodon-Amazons: Lots of shells have been found on the hilltop in Dundartepe, this must have been their favorite food - obviously the same as the Capsien people in North Africa.

In the Capsien period there was the custom to work human bones. There have been found daggers made of long bones, and other tools. Skulls were used as bowls and trophies. Furthermore, there have

been found a lot of jewelry: ostrich eggshells with ornamentation, beads made of ostrich eggs, perforated and ochre-dyed seashells.

A large amount of Capsien stone tools had been dyed red by using ochre. Ochre has a ritual meaning and is particularly connected with matriarchal cultures. Herein we see a further nexus with the tradition of Amazons in this region.

In the Neolithic Capsien (4th and 3rd millennium BC) arrowheads are the characteristic finding. In this we again have a cross-connection with the Amazons because they were considered to have been excellent archers. The discovery of a female corpse who had been killed by an arrow confirms our association.



lots of arrowheads

At Djebel Sened west of Gafsa we have been guided to a deserted Berber village. The people had lived in very ancient cave dwellings. Amazingly, the rather hidden location of this place is remarkably similar to Tekkeköy, that site at the Black Sea coast which we associate with the Amazon city Chadesia.

Neolithic site at Sedouikech (Cedouikech) on Djerba

In the southeastern part of the island Djerba at the village Sedouikech (also: Cedouikech) we have discovered a Neolithic site. It is situated near a Muslim sanctuary (Marabout). Even today this Marabout is of great importance, specially for women, because rituals and prayers at this place shall help to get children. Amazingly, there exists a contemporary correspondence to the sacred island of the Amazons in the Black Sea – Aretias (today: Giresun Adasi). For the same reason - to become pregnant - women come on this island to pray at a sacred rock, the so-called Hamza.

The rituals in this sanctuary on Djerba are conducted by two very corpulent women who are dressed in colorful clothes. The appearance of these women reminds of the Neolithic statues from Malta which represent corpulent priestesses. The island Malta is very famous for its impressing huge Neolithic temples, and it is not very far away from Djerba, it lies between the northern coast of Tunisia and Sicily.

Quite near to this Muslim sanctuary we have found the remains of a Neolithic site which according to the local people is still a place of ritual importance. There can be discerned two rows of monoliths which are arranged in a straight line.



two rows of rock settings

Roughly in the center there is a rock with a presumably vulva-shaped hole which had been drilled through the whole rock. A candle has recently been placed into the hole which makes it evident that even today this rock is of ritual meaning.



sacred stone with candle

At the periphery of this site there is a well with an elaborate water basin made of stone. It appears to have the shape of a vulva.



vulva-shaped water basin

Place of worship and sacred water place are also the characteristic elements at the Belvedere in Tozeur.

The very ancient vulva motif is considered to be the characteristic symbol of the almighty 'Great Mother' - the predominating goddess of matriarchal cultures. This Neolithic site in Sedouikech on Djerba corroborates its connection with matriarchal or at least matrifocal civilization.

The Berber village of Tamezret

In the village Tamezret near Matmata we came across a vital Berber culture, where the local people are still proud of their very ancient culture. In fact, this is very remarkable because in Tunisia of today there prevails the tendency to understate the importance of the Berber culture or even to deny its existence.

A small museum of a dedicated Berber gives a profound insight into their culture. We have got the outstanding information that on the fourth day after the wedding the Berber bride puts on a very valuable dress and for one day she represents the Berber queen Kahina. In that the former predominating role of the Berber woman becomes manifest, and it demonstrates that the memory of the famous Berber queen Kahina is still present.

The elaborate carpets of the Berbers - a very ancient tradition - frequently show a vulva-like motif, a further clue to the lost matriarchal roots of the Berbers.



Berber carpet

The Berber women practice a very shrill yelling-like singing. The forceful, almost scaring cadency reminds of battle cry and war singing. Is it a remnant of a much earlier period when the Berber women also took part in the fights like the Berber queen Kahina or even earlier as Amazons?

The rock-paintings of Ghomrassen

The North-African Capsien culture is famous for its impressing rock-paintings which primarily depict their wildlife but also show scenes of their everyday life. North of the town Tataouine at the village Ghomrassen a local guide led us to three places with Neolithic rock-paintings. The most outstanding picture shows the depiction of a rider.



rock painting depicting a rider

This representation calls up that the Amazons had been excellent riders. Unfortunately, the quality of this rock picture is too poor to determine the sex of the riding person.

Conclusions:

- According to our investigations the lake Tritonis must be identical with the Chott Djerid.
- The legendary island Hespera respectively Phla may be the secluded landscape around Tozeur. The religious center was at the hill Belvedere. Following facts speak for it: place of worship, sacred spring, cultic niches, ancient rock pictures.
- The Stone Age Capsien culture which was firmly rooted in this region gives evidence that it was a matriarchal culture, a women predominated civilization.
- The local Berber culture which had developed from the Capsien culture, bears witness of former matriarchal structures: the important role of the women, mighty queens (Kahina, Tin Hinan).
- These are the parallels to the Amazon cultures in Asia Minor and on Lemnos: lots of arrowheads; the same food (shell mounds); very similar settlements, places of worship and monuments.