

NAUCA

DAUGHTER OF THE STEPPES



By
Michel Poulin

NAUCA
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A historical fiction novel

By

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WARNING TO POTENTIAL READERS

THIS FICTION NOVEL CONTAINS GRAPHIC DESCRIPTIONS OF WAR, VIOLENCE, CRUELTY AND SEX, AS WELL AS COARSE LANGUAGE AND CONTROVERSIAL SUBJECTS THAT ARE UNSUITABLE FOR CHILDREN. WHILE THIS NOVEL DEPICTS SOME HISTORICAL PERSONS AND EVENTS FROM THE PAST, THIS IS A WORK OF FICTION AND WORDS OR DEEDS ATTRIBUTED IN IT TO PERSONS WHO EXISTED DO NOT NECESSARILY REFLECT HISTORICAL REALITY.

ABOUT THIS NOVEL

This novel tells the adventures of a young fictitious girl born on the steppes north of the Black Sea in the First Century B.C.E (Before the Common Era). The nomad women riders and warriors of that region and time were actually what the ancient Greeks called 'Amazons' and were much more than just a myth. The author, helped by research and articles written about archaeological finds around the Caucasus area, has strived in this novel to depict as accurately as possible the lifestyle, environment and historical background of those fierce, independent women who were truly the equals of their men.

OTHER BOOKS BY THIS AUTHOR

(All available free online at Free-Ebooks.net, or can be ordered direct via email to the author at natai@videotron.ca.)

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NAUCA – DAUGHTER OF THE STEPPES

MAPS OF SARMATIA AND OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE (1ST CENTURY B.C.E.)



Red arrow : Place of birth of Nauca Yellow arrow : location of Tanais Emporium

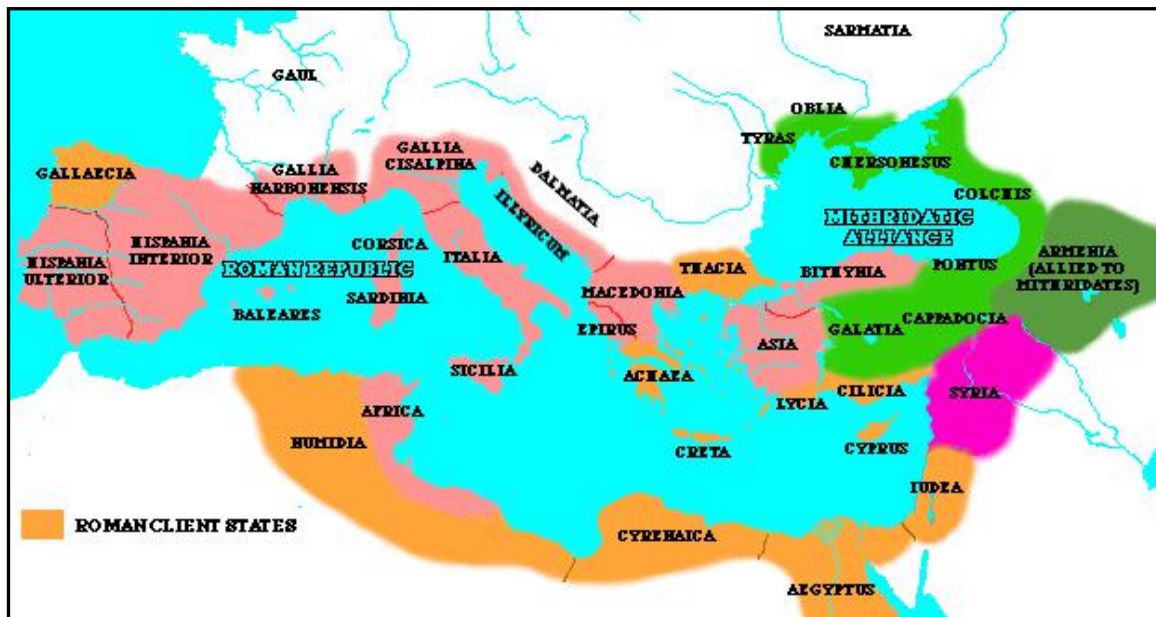


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A nomadic camp in the Caucasus.

CHAPTER 1 – A GIRL IS BORN

09:05 (Caucasus Time)

Friday, May 6, 80 B.C.E. (Before the Common Era)

Sarmatian nomadic campsite

Between the Borysthene (Dniepr) and Tanais (Don) Rivers

Territory of the Sarmatian tribe of the Roxolani (modern Eastern Ukraine)

North of Lake Meotis (Sea of Azov)

“Keep pushing, Amage: I can see the baby’s head now.”

“I...I am doing only that!” protested the exhausted young woman lying on top of a bear fur with her legs spread apart and with her sister-in-law Sarukê and niece Mada present to assist her labor. Childbirth being a women’s affair, the male members of the family had been told to wait outside of the yurt, the traditional felt hut used by the nomads plying the steppes and forests of the Caucasus. Finally, after a last push by Amage, Sarukê exclaimed in triumph.

“I have it!”

The noise of two slaps were followed by wails from the newborn, which was quickly rinsed with lukewarm water before being wrapped in a cloth and handed over to Amage.

“Congratulations: it’s a girl!” said Sarukê. “She is big, strong and healthy. Hold it while I cut the umbilical cord.”

The Sarmatian woman quickly made a knot in the umbilical after cutting it, then washed Amage’s groin area and her own hands afterwards. Next, Sarukê looked at her thirteen-year-old daughter Mada.

“You can go tell Boraspos that he can come in now.”

“Yes, Mother!” replied the teenager before getting up on her feet and leaving the yurt. Outside, she found the father of the baby, Boraspos, waiting anxiously with his brother Irganos, Sarukê’s husband, and the four other young children of their family group. Mada smiled to Boraspos, a strong, tall man with a short beard.

“The baby is out and well, Uncle. It is a girl. You can come in now.”

Boraspos didn’t have to be told twice and entered the yurt, going to his wife’s side and kneeling near her to admire his new daughter.

“She really looks big and strong. You produced a splendid daughter for us, my sweet Amage. What name would you like for us to give her?”

“I was thinking of ‘Nauca’.”

“I like it! Then, ‘Nauca’ it is. I am sure that she will make a great hunter and warrior worthy of our tribe. Rest now: I will take care of things around our yurt today.” Boraspos then kissed his wife and his new daughter before getting up and leaving the yurt, going to his brother Irganos.

“We called our new daughter ‘Nauca’.”

“Nauca...a fine name for a Sarmatian girl.”

“Indeed! I think that I am going to go hunt something for supper tonight, to celebrate her birth. You and your family are invited, of course.”

“Then, I better go hunt with you, Brother, or we may dine on hot air.”

The laughing Irganos just had time to step aside in order to avoid the booted foot headed for his bum.

08:26 (Caucasus Time)

Tuesday, September 8, 76 B.C.E.

Sarmatian nomadic campsite

Hills east of the Borysthene (Dniepr) River

Territory of the Roxolani Tribe, north of Lake Meotis (Sea of Azov)

'THAT'S IT, NAUCA! USE YOUR KNEES, HEELS AND BALANCE TO MAKE IT TURN!'

Amage, standing beside her husband Boraspos as their little Nauca made her first ride solo on a young horse, had a proud smile on her face as she watched her youngest daughter expertly control her mount without bridles and while riding bareback.

"By Cybele¹, Nauca must be one of the fastest learning children I have ever seen in terms of learning how to ride a horse. She is still only four and a half years old and she is already riding with ease."

"Well, our son Galatus was also a quick learner but I must concede that Nauca seems to be born to ride. She should make a great huntress and warrior."

The mention of the word 'warrior' somehow cooled the enthusiasm of Amage, whose smile partly faded.

"You know that I did my share of fighting in the past, when those Alani raiders were roaming our tribe's territory, stealing horses and killing people. However, this business of everybody raiding and stealing from everyone else strikes me as both foolish and cruel. The steppes are big enough for everybody to live in peace and prosper on them and in the mountains. To kill whole families while stealing their herds and then brag about that around campfires at night is wrong in my opinion. I know that this is the way us Sarmatians have been living for generations, but do we really want to continue to do such senseless killings?"

Boraspos calmly looked down at his wife, understanding her feelings.

"Well, that is one reason why me and my brother Irganos have broken away from our old tribal group and have gone to our own separate pastures, Amage. I am proud to be both a hunter and a warrior and I am ready any day to kill an enemy attacking us, but I found no honor or pleasure into attacking without provocation other people's camps and stealing their horses. You remember when I once objected to a planned raid by our old group, before we split from it?"

"Yes, I do, Boraspos: some called you a coward and laughed at you."

"And I made them swallow their words afterwards. Maybe, one day, this urge to steal and kill will fade away. Unfortunately, even if we ourselves don't raid and steal from other people, we still have to train as warriors, if only to defend ourselves against raiders, looters and invaders. For that reason I will make sure that our little Nauca

¹ Cybele: Ancient Asian goddess, venerated as 'Mother of the Mountains' and associated with rocks, wild animals and birds of prey.

learns everything I can teach her about riding, shooting a bow and fighting with other weapons. She may still be very young but her body is already tall and strong for her age. She is in fact taller than many boys of her age who I have seen before. We can be proud of her, Amage.”

Boraspos then gently put his left arm around his wife’s shoulders as they both continued to watch Nauca ride around their camp and its surrounding grassy pasture field.

06:25 (Caucasus Time)

Thursday, October 2, 71 B.C.E.

Boraspos and Irganos campsite

Hilly summer pastures near the eastern shores of the Borysthene River

The morning call of the rooster her family possessed woke up Nauca, who was sleeping beside her elder sister Tamura in one corner of their yurt. Well accustomed by now to the family routine, she got up from under the bear skin the two girls used as a blanket to keep warm in this fresh Autumn season and quietly started dressing up for her early morning tasks. At nine and a half, Nauca was already a good 150 centimeters tall and had the body of a young athlete, thanks to the tough living of the steppes and constant physical work. Her reddish-brown hair was worn long and loose, down past her shoulders, and she had long, strong legs which made her a fast and nimble runner indeed. Putting on a pair of woolen trousers and a long-sleeved tunic, Nauca buckled around her waist a leather belt which supported an iron dagger in its scabbard, then put on a winter coat and a peaked cap with ear flaps made of rabbit pelts stitched together, finishing by lacing on a pair of fur-lined leather boots. With the inside of the tent still in the dark but aided by her exceptional eyesight and by her knowledge of the tent’s layout, Nauca then walked out of the yurt, pushing aside the patch of felt covering the entrance. Once outside, she inhaled with delight a deep breath of the cold morning air and quickly looked around her at the still mostly dark grass fields and forests surrounding their two tents. Her family and that of Irganos would soon have to move down from this high plateau that had served as their summer pasture, to lead their herd of horses to warmer winter pastures on the plains and forests bordering the nearby Borysthene River.

Going around the side of her family’s yurt, Nauca grabbed a wooden bucket used to collect mare’s milk and walked past the wooden cages containing the dozen chickens

her family kept as providers of fresh eggs, heading towards the nearest mare of their herd. She suddenly saw movement out of the corner of her right eye and snapped her head around, in time to see a dark human silhouette come out from behind the yurt and run at her, a sword in hand. That was the kind of situation when most persons either fled or fought. In Nauca's case, her hunting experiences with her father had accustomed her to fight rather than flee. However, the man now running at her was much bigger than her and wore some kind of armor and a helmet, on top of being armed. Her first reflex was to shout as loud as she could, in order to warn her family, while reaching for her dagger.

"MARAUDERS IN THE CAMP! MARAUDERS IN THE CAMP!"

Her attacker let out an angry growl and accelerated further the pace of his charge. Half frozen by fear and surprise, Nauca realized that she would certainly lose in a straight strength contest. However, she knew that she would be more agile and nimble than the big man charging her, who was weighed down by his armor. Trying a desperate move, she rolled in a tight ball on the grass towards her attacker, to stop abruptly when she hit his legs. The man made a cruel grin as he raised his sword to strike her.

"That was a stupid move, gir..."

His last word strangled in his throat when Nauca, pushing up her torso with her left arm, stabbed the man in the testicles with her iron dagger, performing a vertical thrust with all her strength. The atrocious pain from that strike froze the man, while his eyes bulged. He then passed out and collapsed on the ground. Nauca quickly rolled aside, barely missing being pinned down under the heavy man. Enraged and with adrenaline now filling her veins, she knelt over her attacker and repeatedly stabbed him in the neck, cutting his right-side jugular. With the man now quickly bleeding to death and shaken by spasms, Nauca jumped back on her feet and looked quickly around her. Marauders and looters rarely acted alone and she suspected that other bandits could have infiltrated the campsite. Seeing that her dying attacker had a gorytos² containing a bow and a large quantity of arrows, Nauca quickly grabbed the bow, along with a half dozen arrows, then ran around her family's yurt. Her acute vision showed her at once two dark shapes approaching the entrance of her uncle Irganos' tent, while two more shapes were now running towards the entrance of her own family tent. Still pumped full of adrenaline and resolved to protect her family at all cost, Nauca put one knee on the ground and quickly

² Gorytos : Scythian-style large quiver which could contain a bow, up to a hundred arrows, plus a pair of javelins. Widely used by horse riders of the steppes.

positioned one of her arrows on the bow she had taken. She didn't have the full strength of a grown man but her archery lessons with her father and her hunting expeditions had already made her a redoubtable archer. With her desperation adding to her strength, she drew the bow's string and let loose, aiming at the lead man charging her. Hit in the throat from a distance of maybe twenty meters, the man hesitated, then collapsed on the ground while emitting a gurgling sound. His companion, seeing that, accelerated to a full sprint while holding high his battle-axe and screaming a war cry. Nauca's second arrow flew less than three seconds later, hitting the man square in the middle of the chest as he was a mere eight meters away. As the man fell on his knees, gravely wounded, Nauca got up on her feet, so that she could shoot more arrows over his head. The two men who had been about to enter Irganos' yurt, probably with the intention of slaughtering the family in their sleep, hesitated on seeing their two comrades go down in quick succession. That was when they decided that it was time to retire to safety and ran back towards their waiting horses, tied to a nearby tree. Nauca didn't let them go, instead aiming carefully her two next shots and pinning down the two marauders with arrows in their backs. Holding her bow and remaining arrow in her left hand, she drew again her dagger and ran to the man kneeling close by, who was desperately trying to extract the arrow stuck in his chest. Seeing his battle-axe lying in the grass near him, Nauca changed her mind and sheathed her dagger, then grabbed the axe. A furious swing of the axe to the neck half severed the head of the wounded bandit, killing him instantly. Nauca's father was emerging from the family tent, his battle-axe in hand, as Nauca started sprinting towards the two men she had shot in the back, resolved to finish them off. By now, even though she was still a preteen girl, Nauca was in a total killing frenzy state, enraged at seeing that men would attack her family like this, without provocation and in a most treacherous way. A Scandinavian Viking who would have watched her then would have said that she was now in a 'berserker' state and would probably have applauded her. Getting to the nearest of the two men she had shot, who was crawling towards his horse, she let go her bow and arrow and, using both hands, delivered a vertical chopping blow to the man's neck. This time, she did sever completely his head. The second wounded man was killed by an axe blow a mere few seconds later. With no one left to kill, Nauca took one step back and took a few deep breaths to calm down and chase away her remaining rage.

Her father got to her as she was still trying to calm down. Seeing that she was apparently not wounded, Boraspos then checked out the two marauders lying in the grass, finding them to be dead. Returning to his young daughter, he hugged her warmly while speaking softly to her.

"You were incredible, Nauca. You most probably saved both our family and that of my brother by killing those marauders. If not for you, those bastards would have killed us in our sleep, then would have left with our horses and possessions."

"I...I only reacted from instinct, Father. I didn't have time to think at all when that first marauder sprinted at me to silence me. I killed him with my dagger, then grabbed his bow and shot the four others."

"And you proved yourself to be a born-warrior in the process, Nauca. I am so proud of you."

"What do we do now, Father?"

Boraspos faced her and smiled gently to her.

"Now, we collect the weapons, armor and horses of those thieves before throwing their bodies to the wolves in the forest. Forget your milking duties: Tamura and Galatus will take care of milking our mares. Let's strip those two bastards first."

Nauca was pulling off the scale armor vest of one of the thieves when Irganos came at a run, to then stop near her and Boraspos. The admiring look her uncle gave her made Nauca feel both pride and satisfaction.

"Nauca, I must thank you for protecting us like this. To take on single-handedly five grown men is a feat that will be told around campfires for the years to come."

"But, Uncle, I only did what was necessary for me and all of us to stay alive."

"True, but that didn't diminish in anyway your merit and valor in combat in killing those stealing bastards."

"Irganos is right, Nauca." cut in Boraspos. "As a reward, you will decide how the loot from these bandits will be split. In fact, you could justly claim everything for yourself."

"But that would be completely selfish, Father. Besides, I can only use one set of weapons and armor. I am sure that Galatus, Tamura and my cousins could use the rest and I would be happy to share all that with them."

That earned her approving nods from both Boraspos and Irganos.

“Generous on top of being brave... You truly make me proud of you today, my dear daughter. We will discuss the distribution of the loot at lunch time, around a good fire.”

Five hours later, with the two families sitting around a campfire on which pieces of horse meat were slowly roasting, Boraspos stood up to speak to them all, Nauca at his side.

“My friends, today Nauca proved herself to be worthy of being called a ‘warrior’ and, through her valor and bravery, saved the lives of our two families. I then promised her that she would have first pick on the weapons, armor and possessions taken on the five bandits she killed. While I still intend her to have first choice, I would like to present to her two items that, in my opinion, are probably the most valuable for a warrior in the lot.”

Going to the pile of weapons, armor, purses and horse equipment set near the fire, Boraspos grabbed both a sword in its scabbard and a gorytos containing a bow, dozens of arrows and two javelins, then handed them to Nauca.

“The bow in this gorytos is truly of superior manufacture and will be a worthy weapon for such an expert archer as you, my daughter. As for this sword, I examined it earlier on and found it to be a rare example made of probably the finest steel that is known, a steel called ‘Hinduwani steel’³, which is made into far-off India. The bandit who had it probably stole it from a caravan merchant. You may take that sword out of its scabbard and examine it, Nauca.”

His daughter did so and was immediately intrigued by the dark, wavering pattern visible on the surface of the long, razor-sharp blade.

“Hey, it is as if someone drew black waves on that blade with a piece of coal. What are they, Father?”

“In truth, I don’t know. However, a merchant in Tanais⁴ once showed me a similar blade, for which he was asking a ruinous price. He told me then that such Hinduwani Steel blades were the best and toughest blades one could find in the World and that caravans from the East sometimes brought a few Hinduwani Steel weapons, to

³ Hinduwani steel : A type of high-carbon steel made in Southern India, starting in the 6th Century B.C.E. When adopted by Arab artisans, it was renamed ‘Damascus Steel’.

⁴ Tanais : An old Greek emporium (trading post) situated on the delta of the Tanais (Don) River, some 30 km west from modern Rostov-on-Don.

be exchanged against horses and furs. I believe that such a blade would truly befit a warrior of your quality, Nauca.”

Nauca, overwhelmed, could only admire for long seconds the long, shiny blade. Putting it back in its scabbard and putting it down near the cut piece of tree trunk she used as a seat, she then took out and examined the composite recurved bow, which was obviously of top manufacture.

“Decidedly, those marauders must have stolen many unfortunate people in order to have such superb weapons, Father. Only the gods may know how many people they killed in the process.”

“And killing them was an act of justice, on top of being an act of self-defense, Nauca. You may now continue to distribute the loot by yourself.”

Looking down at the pile of weapons, pieces of armor, purses and other equipment, Nauca hesitated for a moment before grabbing the heaviest purse in the lot for herself, along with a scale mail armored vest that could reasonably fit her once grown up, along with a helmet, a half-moon-shaped ‘Pelta’ iron and leather shield, a bronze battle-axe, a pair of javelins and a long Kontos lance, a thrusting weapon meant to be held with both hands by a charging mounted warrior. She completed her part of the loot with the best set of saddle and horse bridles in the lot. Nobody objected to her choices, as all agreed with Boraspos that she had earned them. Now left with the task of distributing around the rest of the loot, Nauca decided to split most of the bronze, silver and gold coins left between her father and her uncle, while reserving the few pieces of jewelry for her mother, aunt, young sister and her cousin Mada, now a 22 year-old young woman who was soon due to get married. The largest sets of armor went to Boraspos, Irganos and her cousins Akkas and Chodios, now teenagers approaching their twenties. The last items to be distributed were the horses taken from the marauders. While Nauca loved her present horse, a small and stocky Tarpan Eurasian horse that fit well with her present size, she knew that she would eventually need a larger horse. She thus chose for herself a splendid silvery-white Akhal Teke horse, a tall, fast and powerful race of horse which was prized all around the steppes and beyond.

With the loot distribution completed and with everybody most happy and satisfied, the two families then ate lunch around the campfire before resuming their normal daily tasks, with the happy Nauca invited by her father to go hunt with her, so that she could use her new bow. Two days later, the two families dismounted their yurts and packed

them on their two small chariots, in order to move down to the eastern shores of the Borysthene River in advance of the approaching Winter.

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