

PENTTI AALTO

The Horse in Central Asian Nomadic Cultures

Herodotus tells us in his History (III 84) that when the seven Persian conspirators had overthrown the usurpers they decided to keep Persia a monarchy: "As concerning the making of a king, they resolved that he should be elected whose horse, when they were all mounted in the outskirts of the city, should first be heard to neigh at sunrise". After Darius had won the kingship with the aid of his groom Oibares he (III 88) "made and set up a carved stone, whereon was graven the figure of a horseman, with this inscription: "Darius son of Hystaspes, aided by the excellence of his horse " (here followed the name) "and of Oibares, his groom, won the kingdom of Persia". The Persians were originally nomads and had entered the plateau probably at the same time as other Aryans invaded India. According to Herodotus (I 125) the Persian tribes Dai, Mardi, Dropici and Sagartii were still nomads while the other tribes were already living as tillers of the soil. Many Iranian tribes were living as nomads in the Eurasian steppe zone at the same time.

The horse had been brought to the Near and Middle East by Aryans who c. 2000 B.C. came there as chariot fighters. The Babylonian king Nebukadressar I seems to have introduced horseback riding just before 1100 B.C., but several centuries later the chariot still played the dominant role on the battlefield. According to Ungnad (ZDMG 77, 1923,

p. 89) even the Accadian and Hebrew names of the horse seem to be loans from Aryan.

In the oldest Aryan source in India, the Rigveda, the chariot alone is mentioned as the vehicle of gods and men. Only the Maruts, the military retinue of the god Indra, ride on horseback.

Zarathustra, the Iranian religious reformer, lived among the northeastern tribes in the Parthian and Chwarezmian areas where the population gained its livelihood as nomads. The Danish Iranist Christensen compared the nomadic culture reflected in the Avesta to that of the nomadic Turkmens of our time. In the Avesta we also find the oldest genuine information about the culture of Central Asian nomads, who lived in winter on meat and in summer on milk products. The use of mare's milk was especially characteristic of these peoples. This is already mentioned by Homer (Iliad XIII 5) and Hesiod (frg. 55) when speaking of the Scythians. In the Avesta it occurs in the Videvdāt V 52 together with the milk of other animals, and in the Nirangistan 30 as hurā 'kumiss'^{s/}described as a commonly used drink.

The Turkic word for the fermented mare's milk qumfz (attested in the literature since the Qutad̄u Bilig, 1069 A.D.) is now used in most languages. Räsänen wants to connect it with the verb qim- 'to stir'. This seems to fit in with the description of the preparation of the beverage among the Scythians by Herodotus (IV 2) and among the Turks and Mongols by later travellers such as Rubruc, Marco Polo, etc. Even in the Secret History of the Mongols (85) esüg is prepared in the same way. Perhaps the "beaten sour-milk" in the later Zarathustrian work Bundahišn XXXII 13 also means kumiss. Chinese sources (Hou Han-shu quoted by Rudenko, Die Kultur der Hsiung-nu und die Hügellgräber von Noin Ula (Antiquitas 3: 7), Bonn 1969, p. 29) also tell that the Hsiung-nu (Huns) drank kumiss. Though fermented

mare's milk is thus obviously one of the oldest common features of the nomadic cultures, each people seems to have its own name for it. Regrettably, the Hunnic name for it has not been preserved: Pulleyblank (Asia Major 9, 1962, p. 253) reconstructs Hsiung-nu * γ rak on the basis of Chin. lao and Mongol ayirar.

The Scythians seem to have been the first to use the armament and attire which then - with slight modifications - became characteristic of the nomadic peoples. Their long bows, lances and scabbards, trousers, boots, coats and head-dress, designed for practical use on horseback, all seem to follow the Scythian style closely for many centuries.

The Europeans learned to use the stirrup from the Iranian Alans as late as the sixth century A.D. However, a picture on the Scythian "Chertomlyk vase" (fourth century B.C.) looks very much like a horse with a stirrup. It has also been stated that the Hsiung-nu had had stirrups at least in the third century B.C. According to Bivar ("The Stirrup and its Origin", Oriental Art N.S. I, London 1955 p. 61-65), however, the strap hanging from the saddle-bow in the Chertomlyk vase could easily be only some loose attachment of the girth, since e.g. the stirrup is not attested in the roughly contemporary Kurgans of Pazyryk. Sulimirski, again, states (The Sarmatians, London 1970, p. 127) that stirrups were for the first time found in the Kuban barrowgraves attributed by him to the Siraces and dated from 100 B.C. to A.D. 200. In the opinion of Bivar the probability seems to be that during the fifth century A.D. the advantages of the stirrup became apparent to the mounted nomads upon the Inner Asian frontiers of China and especially to the powerful tribe known as the Juan-Juan. Because of the lack of a stirrup, riding demanded extremely thorough training, since the rider had to let loose of the bridle to use his bow and arrow. This also implied very close cooperation

between the rider and his horse. Later, the Arabs for instance, valued Central Asian slaves highly because of their skill in riding and archery the nomads had to ride when both tending cattle and hunting for food. Because of their invaluable skills the best riders became knights quite early and their skills were the highest chivalrous virtues. According to Herodotus (I 136) the Persian educated their boys from five to twenty years old and taught them what could be characterized as typical nomadic virtues, viz. riding, archery and telling the truth. In Persian the 'knight' suwār was originally a 'rider' asabāra, and the word for sitting on horseback nišast became the word for 'behaviour' in general.

The use of horses for hunting and military purposes had early led to a testing of their strength and speed in racing and to the breeding for ever faster and stronger horses. An early proof of the training of the chariot horses is the Hittite work written in the 14th century B.C. by the Mitannian equerry Kikkuli. Its Aryan terminology proves that the training of horses was a technique developed by the Aryan nomads coming from the steppe zone. According to the Avesta (Yasna XI 1-2), horse races were a part of popular festivals. The horse was so highly esteemed that in Yašt XIX 68 the river Heatumant is said to gain the strength of a horse. The Hsiung-nu also used to organize annual horse races, as the Turkic and Mongol horse breeding peoples still do.

Horses have always been very valuable objects of commerce and taxation. In many passages of the Avesta the value of the horses is stressed. For example the curing of sick persons is rewarded in Videvdāt XXII 3 by a thousand fast running horses; in VII 41 if the Governor of a province is cured, the reward is a chariot with a four-horse team, while for the wife of a district governor a mare was to be paid. A ritual purification of a district governor again

costs a stallion of first quality (IX 37).

The Pahlavi work *Ayatkar i Zamaspič* (XXII 11) tells that the steppe nomads in Turkestan had horses which ran 30 parasangs (some 170 km) in one day and night. A speciality of the Hsiung-nu were the "thousand-li-horses". Contrary to the general custom, the Shan-yü Mao-tun (ca. 210 - 174 B.C.) gave such a horse to the Tung-hu ruler. The Chinese bought horses from the Hsiung-nu, and ca. 100 B.C. they were especially interested in getting excellent horses from Ferghana, which were famous all over the world. In the *Avesta* (*Yašt*s XIV 31 and XVI 10) the speaker prays for the sight of a stallion, which even on a dark night can see whether a hair on the ground has fallen from the tail or from the mane of a horse. According to the Pahlavi *Bundahišn* (XXIV T 47) this was a peculiarity of the Taji horses.

It seems probable that the Scythians and Persians had organized exercises for large cavalry units in the form of hunts on horseback. Tens of thousands of riders participated in the hunts of the Hsiung-nu rulers. When the Chinese pilgrim Hsüan-tsang arrived at Tokmak (c. 629 A.D.) he met the Khan of the Western Turks just setting off on a hunting expedition with a very impressive retinue. The Mongol cavalry corps got their field practice in the great hunts organized by the Emperor every autumn. The very same method was still followed by the Manchu Emperors of China.

The tactics, strategy and logistics of the armies of the nomadic peoples were determined in detail by the horse. The Pahlavi *Vendidād* XVIII 12 mentions that 500 enemies had two horses each while the corresponding *Avesta* passage mentions only the figure "a thousand" horses. In the Mongol cavalry every soldier had several reserve mounts and the army was consequently able to advance very fast.

The historical and epic heroes are presented as possessing numerous noble horses. In a Zarathustrian gatha

(Yasna XLIV 18) the Prophet asks God if he could have as reward for his truthfulness ten mares and one stallion as well as one camel. In Yašt XVIII 5 the goddess of plenty grants the pious a thousand horses in addition to other boons. In Afrinakan III 9 the greatest possible gift to the pious is said to be a thousand mares with foals. In the Persian national epic the Shahnameh the heroes never want to go on foot; it was something quite extraordinary when Bahram had to fight on foot after he had killed his own stallion when it ran after mares on the battlefield.

Among the Altaic peoples, too, walking was a token of poverty and misery. Ramstedt (Kalmückische Wörterbuch 213 b) thus proposed to connect OT yadiy, CT yayir 'on foot' with Mo. yadayu, Kalm. yadū 'poor, miserable'. The Orkhon inscriptions tell of the miserable state of the Turkic people (I E 28): "The people ... came back utterly exhausted, without horses and without clothes". However, Prince Kül even fought and won on foot (I E 32). Tonuykuk describes the distress of the Turkic people (W 4): "Those who had remained independent came together and they were 700. Two thirds of them were mounted; a third of them were on foot". The Secret History shows us how small were the resources of the family of Chingiz, since this can obviously be estimated on the basis of the number of its horses (cf. e.g. 3, 90, 99). As Darius mentions that he procured horses for his cavalry (Bisutun I 87), so Chingiz started the building of an Empire by appointing officials to take care of the geldings, horses and other important domestic animals, and of the carts (SH 124). According to the Meng Ta Pei-lu quoted by Desmond Martin in JRAS 1943, p. 51 f., the young Mongol was taught to ride at the age of three by his mother. "On reaching the age of four or five he was given his first bow and arrows and from then on was encouraged to spend as much time as possible hunting on horseback."

Consequently his riding and archery became superb."Similar tales are told in Chinese sources about the Huns. Martin expresses his great admiration of the Mongol horse:" From thirteen to fourteen hands in height, watered once a day and for the most part grass fed, the Mongol pony is unequalled the world over for stamina. Capable of journeys impossible to other horses, it contributed in no small measure to the mighty conquests of its rider" (p. 50).

The need for well trained, skilled riders gave birth to the feudal system in the Persian Empire, which we find fully developed under the Sassanian Dynasty. Since Achaemenian times the Persian army had been built on a decimal system, and the ranks of the officers were named correspondingly. There seems to be certain evidence that the Turk and Uigur armies were organized in the same way. The decimal organization was followed quite systematically in the army of Chingiz (SH 202, 205, 224). Even in Tibet the same system was applied.

Herodotus tells us (IV 120) that Darius wanted to conquer the Scythians but these avoided his invasion through the mobility their mounts gave them. This same mobility was the strength of all of the nomadic peoples. When the Turk Qayan Bilgä (716-734 A.D.) planned to build towns and get his people permanently settled, his Minister Tonyukuk succeeded in convincing him that mobility was their only protection against the numerical superiority of the neighbouring states. Later mobility was again the most important strategic doctrine of the Mongols.

One of the most popular stories about the barbarous habits of the Huns is the description of how they ate raw meat made tender by being placed between the horseback and the rider's saddle. However, the description is probably based on a misunderstanding. Benjamin Bergmann tells us that the Kalmucks (ca. 1800 A.D.) used to cure the back of a

horse with saddle sores by putting a slice of raw meat on the wound under the saddle. I think this was also the real intention of the Huns.

A horse was always - and still is - its master's best friend. In the epics (including the Buddha-legend in India) a heroic horse is always born at the same time as the hero himself. Especially among the Iranians a man often derives his name from some peculiar quality of his horse. So e.g. Pourušaspa 'the one with a gray horse', the father of Zarathustra. Furthermore, certain Iranian tribes derived their names from their special horses, like the Zariaspai, Arimaspai, etc. When the master died his horse had to follow him so that he should not be lacking a mount in the world beyond. As the Scythian burials excavated by Soviet archaeologists prove, this custom has been in use since time immemorial. The excavations have also yielded carts used to transport the dead in the funeral ceremonies. We know from historical sources that this custom was observed e.g. in the funeral of Chingiz. In the Old Turkic Yenisei (sepulchral) inscriptions, even the horse is mentioned among those mourning for the deceased.

Herodotus tells (I 215) about the Massagetae east of the Caspian Sea that they "are like the Scythians in their dress and manner of life ... The sun is the only god whom they worship, to him they sacrifice horses; the reason for this is that he is the swiftest of the gods and therefore they give him the swiftest of the mortal beings". In Iran too the Sun was called Aurvataspa 'the one with swift horses'. Both Indian and Iranian religious sources represent the Sun as driving in a chariot drawn by horses. In rock-drawings we meet the very same motive e.g. in Mongolia. The Central Asian Sacaes as well as their relatives, the Sakas in India, worshipped the Sun, Mithra, identified with Ahura Mazda, the God of the Zoroastrians. Even in India Mitra (Mihira

of the Sakas) was called aśveśa 'Lord of the horses', haripriya 'Friend of the horses', aśvaparākrama 'fast as a horse'. Since time immemorial the horse sacrifice, the aśvamedha, was in India the most valuable sacrifice and expressly offered by kings. Even the Buddhist literature mentions a horse among the "seven jewels" of the ideal ruler: this has been interpreted as Saka influence.

The Avesta mentions in several connections sacrifices of a hundred horses to deities like Anāhitā (e.g. Yašt V 21 etc.) and Drvāspa, the patroness of horses (Yašt IX etc). Among Turkic and Mongolian peoples horse sacrifice has been in use until this century.

We are, in my opinion, entitled to say that nomadism proper and large scale pastoralism in general were made possible only by a many-sided utilization of the domesticated horse. History shows that a clash in some remote tract of the large steppe and desert zone always caused a wave-like motion which reached and crossed even the far-off confines of the peoples involved. Thus the great migration of the peoples in Europe caused by the invasion of the Huns in fact originated in the innermost parts of Asia. With every right, the horse has been named "the historymaking domestic animal". The cultural contacts across the steppes so decisively important for the civilization of mankind were possible only thanks to the horse. Even today we can still admire the noble throughbred mounts from Turkmenistan, Ferghana and Mongolia, which were delighting mighty emperors centuries and millennia ago.

