



ASB II. AMONG THE SCYTHIANS

ASB

ii. Among the Scythians

The Scythians (q.v.) are generally believed to have been among the earliest, if not the earliest, of the Eurasian peoples to learn to ride the horse. Owing to the uncertainty of life in the steppes, both the nomads and the farm laborers had to be protected by mounted warriors; without horsemanship the development of an extensive nomadism in south Russia would have been unthinkable. In wars of aggression, the mobility of the horse gave the Scythians a great advantage over their enemies and was an essential prerequisite of their rapid military successes and conquests in the first millennium B.C. In Greek sources the Scythians are referred to as *Hippotoxótai* “mounted warriors” (Herodotus, 4.46, 9.49), a term which testifies to the importance of both the horse and the bow in their strategy. In the armament of the Sarmatians (q.v.) the bow had lost something of its former significance, the lance and the long sword apparently being their principal weapons. To the Scythians the stirrup seems to have been unknown; probably a kind of felt or leather support was used for resting the feet; the Sarmatians appear to have been the first to make use of the metal stirrup. The trappings were profusely ornamented; the animal style predominates. The manes were normally trimmed. Owing to their indocility, the Scythian riding horses were as a rule gelded; the horses excavated in the



tombs of the Pazyryk valley (q.v.) in the Altai Mountains had been treated in the same way; this practice has survived until modern times at many places in Russia and the north Caucasus. The garment of the Scythians was adapted to their equestrian form of life: a close-fitting tunic and baggy trousers. Every adult male had his own stallion, while the tribal chieftains owned large herds of horses; the enormous wealth of horses in the steppes to the north of the Caucasus is still attested in the fourteenth century A.D. by the Arabian traveler Ebn Baṭṭūṭa; about the middle of the nineteenth century, rich landowners in the Kuban area are reported to have possessed up to one thousand horses. The importance of the horse as a sign of social prestige is also borne out by the archeological finds in south Russia and the equine hecatombs which took place at the funerals of kings and tribal chieftains (see below). In art, horses and mounted warriors are extremely popular themes; gods and kings are frequently represented on horseback.

According to Strabo (7.4.8), the Scythian horses were small, exceedingly quick, and difficult to manage. In the tombs of the Pazyryk valley, the finest horses were of the Farḡāna breed, which is widely celebrated for its swiftness; the bulk of the horses, however, were Mongolian ponies of the Przewalski breed.

Besides its military functions, the horse was also used for dragging carts and as a beast of burden. From the Scythian and Sarmatian grave-finds, it appears that the body of the dead was in many instances driven to the grave on a chariot to which several horses had been hitched. Horses were also kept for nourishment; horse-flesh was eaten, and from mare's milk various products, such as kumys and cheese, were prepared (Strabo, 7.4.6). The Homeric expression *hippēmolgoi glaktophágoi* (Iliad 13.5-6), "milk-consuming mare-milkers," apparently applied to a nomadic people in south Russia, shows that the use of mare's milk for food was regarded as characteristic of the inhabitants of that area at an early time.

The importance of the horse in the life of the Scythians and the Sarmatians is reflected by a number of proper names containing the element *aspa-*, the common Iranian word for "horse," found in Greek literary sources and Greek inscriptions from the Pontic area: Aspakos (= Aspaka-), Aspourgōs (= Aspuyra- "owning strong horses," cf. Av. *Ugra-*, *Uyra-*, "strong;" cf. also Aspourgianoí, the name of a tribe in the Azov region [Strabo, 11.2.11]), Baioraspos (= Baiwaraspa- "owning many [ten thousand?] horses," cf. Av. *baēvar-* "ten thousand," NPers. *bīvar*, *Bīvarasp*, Oss. [Iron] *birä*, [Digoron] *be(u)rä* "many"), and others.



In the religion of the Scythians and the Sarmatians the horse played an important part. According to Herodotus (4.61), the favorite victims at sacrifices were horses, and the Massageties (q.v.) sacrificed horses to the sun, their only god (ibid., 1.216). But it is especially in the funeral rites that the religious significance of the horse becomes clear. Here our main literary source is again Herodotus (4.71-75). The description here given is in agreement with the archeological findings, as far as these go. When a king dies, Herodotus informs us, he is buried with horses as well as with one of his concubines and other members of his household, cups of gold, and firstlings of all his possessions. At a commemoration ceremony one year after, a monument consisting of fifty of the king's horses and fifty of his attendants, who had all been killed on this occasion, was set in a circle about the tomb, probably as a kind of protection. Grave monuments consisting of horse carcasses or horse hides are recorded by medieval European and Arabian travelers among the Cumans and various Altaic peoples of Central Asia; the practice has in some places persisted until recent times (J. -P. Roux: *La mort chez les peuples altaïques anciens et médiévaux*, Paris, 1963, esp. pp. 135ff. and J. A. Boyle: "A Form of Horse Sacrifice amongst the 13th- and 14th-Century Mongols," *Central Asiatic Journal* 10, The Hague and Wiesbaden, 1965, pp. 145-50). Although these elaborate funerals, which must have been extremely costly both in lives and material, were partly intended to be political shows, and may even been some kind of an investiture ceremony, it can hardly be doubted that the horses interred with the body were meant as a means of transport to the land of the dead. This is borne out, among other things, by the modern Ossetic *Bax fäldisin* funeral rites, which evidently derive from ancient Scytho-Sarmatian practices, and in which the horse of the dead plays a prominent part as his conveyance to the underworld.

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