

## Horses in the life of Eurasian Turkic peoples

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**Abstract.** Horse played a great role in the life, religious beliefs and rituals of ancient Turkic people. It is hard to overestimate its significance in military, economic, cultural and other life spheres of nomads. That is why horse had a special place in nomad's world-view: it was a sacrificial animal in divine initiation and obsequial rites. Usually, horses found in burial places are fully equipped, bridled, saddled and hobbled. Contemporary Turkic people still have the tradition of burial with horse. A large number of archeological and ethnographic materials including written sources point out that not any horse but precisely the white one was an attribute of Turkic obsequial rites accompanying royalties on the way to "the other world". Horse was an object not only for rituals but also for worship and reverence.

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### Introduction

In the mythology of many Eurasian peoples, horse has a special place which is directly connected with the life style and world-view of ancient Turkic people.

Among all animals, ancient Turkic people gave the greatest preference to horse. They spiritualized it. "There is no more pure and majestic creature on Earth than horse!" Turkic language contains forty epithets only for horse's colour. Horse completely entered the flesh and blood of Turkic people and it paid them back by taking them to steppe with its enchanting expanses. Actually, the whole life of steppe-dwellers, at least from the time of Xiongnu, went by in the saddle or near the horse. Turkoman was the first who understood that if he mounts a horse he will see the world better.

In the poetic myths of Turkic people, horse sometimes symbolizes the peaceful movement of the Sun or the Sun itself as a mare (a spring of life).

The origins of "horse cult" in Eurasia are found in the monocentric concept of horse domestication. First the "horse cult" is discovered in Indo-European tribes who lived in Eastern Europe in the late 4<sup>th</sup> century B. C. Then this cult distributed among neighbouring peoples together with domestic horse.

The investigations of the world-view of ancient Indo-Iranian people (2-1<sup>st</sup> centuries BC) showed that the image of horse had an important place in it. Judging by ancient Indian mythology, horse (ashva) was a common zoomorphic image of the Universe. In the opinion of A.K. Akishev, just as

Asvinas in the Rig-Veda, the twin horses at the head dress from burial mound "Issyk" reflect "very archaic strata of mythological ideas about a common zoomorphic image of the Universe which unites polar and synonymous principles" [1].

Ancient Indian gods Indra, Ashvina, Surya and Ushas, Avestan gods Mitra, Veretragna, Farn, Syavush, Vayu and Tishtrya were embodied in horses.

Horses Dadkhikra and Tarkshya were worshiped by ancient Indians who made sacrifices to them. Horse was one of solar gods and was semantically connected with cosmogony. There are numerous monuments portraying winged horses and so called sun chariots with horses in Central Asia and Kazakhstan.

The image of horsed chariot symbolizing the star of day is connected with horse domestication by steppe tribes and the development of wheel transport.

Possibly it is no coincidence that one of Central-Asian horse raising tribes – Massagetae – idolized the Sun and considered horse as a symbol of it. Researchers often cite a message of Herodotus about the Massagetae: "They revere only the Sun and sacrifice horses to it". According to Herodotus, the meaning of such sacrifice is that "the fastest god needs the fastest animal" [2].

According to the message of Xenophon, the Armenian sacrificial horse was dedicated to Helios-Sun [3].

On Chinese miniatures, horses look unexpectedly stocky. Their legs are quite short in spite of the significant size of bodies. This is possibly

caused by the fact that almost all horses are shown while moving at a trot [4].

During dedications to kind gods, ancient Turks fed horses with milk and said: "The high heaven is the home for horses. Mother Ul'gen' (Earth) is the place for woman-mother".

Chinese monk Chang-Jiang who visited Central Asia in the 20s BC reports that in Davan' there are many argamaks with bloody sweat and they derive from the breed of heaven horses. The name Davan' and the message about Davan' heaven horses are connected with Farghona. A.N. Bernshtam wrote a special excursus about this breed of Farghona horses and compared them to rock paintings of a group of horses in Aravan [5].

Middle-age Turkic tribes gave horse a significant role in their obsequial rites. Written, archeological, ethnographical and folklore sources indicate this fact.

L.P. Potapov who investigated the "horse cult" of Central-Asian peoples noted that this issue is worth more detailed researching, first of all concerning Turkic and Mongolian people because their horse cult was well-developed until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The scientist thinks that the horse cult in the religious beliefs of Turkic peoples usually is presented in two forms. The first form of sacrifice is when animal is killed, its meat is eaten and its skin is hung up at the altar. The second form is when animal is dedicated to one or another god staying alive in the herd of its owner but this animal is marked with a special sign and becomes an object for a number of rites, customs and ritual prohibitions [6].

In Turkic obsequial rites, man's burial together with his horse is a classical form of burial. It can have different combinations: 1) burying man with his horse; 2) a horse is buried only with the things of its owner (cenotaph); 3) burying a fully equipped and saddled horse. In the pit of burial mound, horse was laid on the right or on the left of the departed, a little higher, lower or on the same level with him. They built a separating wall made of logs, stones, stakes or soil between man and his horse so that horse's carcass does not damage man's skeleton.

In Middle Age written sources, there is almost no information about how the departed was transported to the burial place. In earlier time (the era of Xiongnu), people created drawings portraying horse-drawn vehicles and burial sleigh (or boat according to the reconstruction of E. Novgorodova and M. Gorelik) [7].

Written sources testify to the fact that wheel transport was widely spread in the Turkic tribes of Central Asia. Northern Chinese called the ancestries of Uigur "gao gyuy" ("high cart") because of the big wheels of their vehicles. Turkic word "kangly" for

"vehicle" is known from Sanskrit-Turkic bilingual of the 8<sup>th</sup> century "Turkische Turfantexte". G. Clauson thinks that "kangly" is equal to Chinese "gao gyuy tsiy" and vehicles were named by tribe but not vice versa [8].

According to this idea, a canonical pose of horse was formed in ancient Turkic obsequial rite: horse is usually laid on the right of the departed with their heads directed to one side or on the left with their heads directed to the opposite sides, but in both cases the right side of the horse is closer to the departed. Besides, horse's muzzle with bridle is turned to the rider and its body rests upon legs tucked up. So the horse as if stays in grave but not lies. Such a pose of horse in burial place means that the warrior is ready to jump up and go to the other world after he rises from the grave. The majority of ancient Turkic runic epitaphs narrate about it. They say that the main character did not have time to "enjoy life" and "got detached", "flew away", "passed" [9].

Chinese chronicles report about the reverential attitude of Turkic people to "the land of sunrise" in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Besides, they say about the place of eastern entrance to the quarters of khagan.

Ancient Turkic inscriptions of the 18<sup>th</sup> century also give preference to the East. They use term "forward", i.e. with face turned to the east [10]. Turks had a well-developed cult of sky and designated the east with blue colour ("kok"). Eastern Turkic people were called "kok-turks Tonyukuka" [11].

One can understand the meaning of sacrifice, its components and the place of horse in it by considering the cult of sky which existed in Turkic and Mongolian world from antiquity to the present day.

Turkic people believed that Sky elevates that is it gives power to kaghans, the victory over enemies and helped to create tribal alliances. At the same time the life spans are "distributed by the Sky, human sons are all born to die". They said about the departed that he has "flew away".

The content of sacrifice depended on the rank of god or spirit for whom the sacrifice was. Eastern Turks (kok) sacrificed "many sheep and horses" to the Sky [12]. Western Turks, besides sheep and horses, sacrificed bulls to the Sky [13].

The cult of horse that originates in its ritual function in burial memorials of the 6-8 centuries can be observed in the obsequial rite of Beltirs described by N.F. Katanov: "The beloved horse of the departed was saddled with its saddle at the day of death. The things of the departed, even his axe, were tied to the horse. Horse's forelock and tail were braided as woman's hair. Usually it was made by an old man"

Then: "One man mounted a horse and takes the departed away. Another man mounts the saddled horse of the departed and goes there too. Not a single woman goes to the burial ground, only men go". Then they put the departed to the grave, bring the horse and say: "Take your horse!" Then they threw the bridle rein of that horse on his left hand. "Your left hand will turn right in the next world." [14]. However, the tradition of ritual killing for soul transportation to the other world is not fulfilled. By that time it was lost. This fact typologically brings this rite closer to the burial with horse harness in the epoch of ancient Turks.

In the burial of a warrior made in the 4-5 centuries near settlement Kyzyl-Kaynartobe in Zhambyl Region, a statuette of a horse was found along with a belt. In the opinion of M.S. Merschiyev, this statuette is connected with obsequial rite (burial with horse) but it dates back to the time when horse was substituted by its portrayal in religious beliefs [15].

In Borizhar burial ground of the 6-8 centuries, the debris of metal bit was found near the lumbar vertebrae of the horse. In the burials of Semirechye of Turkic time (6-10 c.), a horse with one stirrup and a saddle was found near the departed. In general, the tradition to bury horse with one stirrup is spread in Turkic burials of the 6-10 centuries.

A custom to bury man together with his horse can be found in nomad memorials of the 8-13 centuries. In the time of late Kypchaks (14-15 c.), the departed was sometimes accompanied with horse's saddle or bridle in central Kazakhstan.

As Chinese chronicler Liu Mao Tsai reports, Turkic people first of all put their dead on a dais in yurta. Near yurta, the relatives put sacrificed sheep and horses. In the appointed day, they" took the horse, clothes and thins of the departed and burned them together with the body of the detached. Then they collected ashes, in order to bury them in suitable time, and hung the heads of all sacrificed animals on a pole"[16].

Along with four main gods who personify the corresponding spheres of the Universe, there are secondary gods in ancient Turkic pantheon. They help the main gods and mediate the relationship between Tengri and the Middle World. Two secondary gods ("yol-tengri") mentioned in ancient Uigur "Book of Fortune-Telling" (Yrk Bitig) in the first half of the 10 century belong to such helpers. One of them is "the god of roads on piebald horse" and the other is "the god of roads on black horse [17]. Both "yol-tengi" were the envoys of the heaven god Tengri and the executors of his will. One of them gives man a "kut" (divine grace, soul), and another restores and establishes the state. So, both "yol-

tengri" are the younger brothers of Tengri. Executing his will, they are always en route and thus link the Upper World and the Middle World.

There is an opinion in literature that horse sacrifice belongs to the cult of horse. In 595, Theophylactus Simocatta wrote the following: "Most of all, Turks revere fire, water and air. They sing hymns for earth. They worship only the one who created sky and earth and call him god"[18]. Jean-Paul Roux said more specifically: "Christian Simocatta apprehended Turkic religious system through his ideas about the Creator, though such notion appeared among Altai peoples only in the Mongolian epoch"[19].

Researchers think that the cult of horse is possibly connected with solar cult because white horses were especially revered. A herald on a white horse was sent to report the victory. The defeat was reported by a herald on a black horse. This tradition was well described in the poem of O. Suleymenov "Red Herald and Black Herald" [20].

Returning victorious, Roman triumphers entered the Gate of Victory on white horses. Man on a white horse looks splendidly, thus the white colour symbolized victory. Many of the Turkic and Mongolian peoples have a custom to present something white with good wishes as a New-Year gift. According to Marco Polo, Mongols gave each other white things and presented The Great Khan (Khibulay) with 100 white horses.

Horses have fanciful rare colours. Aristotle mentions this fact in his book about animals. One-colour horse, especially white, is better and One-colour horse, especially white, is better and deserves more attention. His owner will always be a winner in war. Such a horse suits for royal riding.

Many peoples of the world give white horse a special cult role. American Indians sacrificed a white horse to Soma (the god of ancestors' souls). Indians used a white stud in well-known rite "ashvamedha". A white mare took part in the crowning of Celtic king [21].

Slavs, Germans and Celts had the sacred white horses of gods in a sanctuary [22].

Ural Altaians sacrificed horses of white colour to heaven gods Tengri and Ul'gen [23]. Uigurs dedicated red horses with white star to the heaven god. Sayan Altaians sacrificed a white horse to heaven god Ul'gen in the month of autumnal equinox.

Ancient Germans grazed white horses in special forests fixed by god. Only forefathers and "abyzes" (fortune-tellers) were allowed to bridle and saddle white horses [24].

In England, a pair of white horses considered a sacred property of the king [25]. One

circumstance can be traced in the above mentioned facts: many Indo-European and Turkic-Mongolian peoples had a traditional cult of white horses which were sacrificed to gods and kings.

So, the great significance of horse's ritual role formation contains the decision of issue connected with possible domestication of horse by the tribes of Eurasia. The main origin of horse's ritual role in Eurasia is its economic and, first of all, transport importance. The increased economic importance of horse beginning with the second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC led to the formation of ideas about horse's ritual role in the early 1<sup>st</sup> millennium AD. These ideas remained in Middle Age in the form of horse sacrifices and the joint burial of man and his horse.

Various ideological notions connected with horse spread in ancient time and in Middle Age on a very immense territory. Further archeological investigations will make it possible not only to throw light upon the image of horse in the world-view of Turkic and Indo-European peoples but also to reveal new aspects of its role in their religious beliefs.

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