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# Horse Sacrifices and Sacred Groves among the North(west)ern[1] Peoples of East Asia

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## Introduction

Even though the domesticated horse, especially for chariot traction and later for riding, was introduced to the East Asian Heartland (EAH) from abroad during the Bronze Age, the widespread practice of royal and aristocratic horse sacrifice in the EAH is conspicuous to anyone who examines the archeological and historical record. From Shang burials at Anyang to Zhou tombs in Loyang and the tombs of local rulers during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods[2], the profligate use of horses for sacrificial purposes is inescapably evident. Clearly the horse meant a great deal to the elites of the EAH, and the consecration of fine victims to the deceased or to heaven was a mark of tremendous respect. For a settled, agricultural people, this obsession with equine oblation seems incongruous, since the horse is customarily associated with mobile, nomadic peoples. (Mair 2005a, 2003; Linduff 2003)

A full discussion of horse sacrifice in the EAH would require monographic treatment. The aim of this study is much more modest. Namely, we begin with a passage from the *Weishu*《魏书》(*History of the* [*Northern*] *Wei*), "Li zhi 礼志 (Treatise on Ritual)," *juan* 108A. Here we learn the important fact that the bodies of the victims were placed on a frame made from a birch tree. More detail containing these ceremonies is provided in a passage from *Hanshu*《汉书》(*History of the Western Han* [by Ban Gu 班固; 32 – 92 AD; completed after his death by his sister Ban Zhao 班昭; 48? – 116?]), "Xiongnu zhuan 匈奴传 (Monograph on the Xiongnu)," *juan* 94A, which is also found in the *Shiji*《史记》(*The Grand Scribe's Records* [completed ca. 90 BC by Sima Qian 司马迁; ca. 145 – 86 BC]), "Xiongnu liezhuan 匈奴列传 (Monograph on the Xiongnu)," *juan* 50. The passage in question describes a yearly autumnal gathering of the Xiongnu at a sacred

grove in which rituals concerning horses and other domesticated animals took place. From commentaries by Fu Qian 服虔 (2nd c. CE) and Yan Shigu 颜师古 (579 – 645), we learn that these rituals involved sacrifice and, more importantly, that they were passed down centuries later to the Xianbei 鲜卑 (Särbi). Thus the Xianbei inherited at least some of the key traditions of the Xiongnu[3].

Similar practices were continued among many Turkic, Mongolic, and other peoples in South Siberia, Inner Asia, and Central Asia during succeeding centuries up to the present time. But if we search for parallels to the Xiongnu-Xianbei custom of sacrifice of horses in sacred groves, the most plentiful earlier evidence is to be found among Indo-European (IE) peoples. There are many IE variants of related rites, but the closest to those carried out at the Xiongnu-Xianbei autumnal sacrifices is that in which the skin of the horse with head and hooves still attached is suspended from a pole or frame over the sacred site of the ritual or, more commonly, only the head and sometimes one or more hooves are deposited on a pole, on the ground, or in the burial chamber.

In this study, our focus is primarily on the disposition of the sacrificial victims. An adequate investigation of the sacrality of the associated trees and groves in which the horse sacrifices under consideration took place would require separate treatment.

## Xiongnu and Xianbei Tree Worship and Equine Sacrifice

The standard dynastic histories provide clear records of the sacrificial practices of the Xiongnu and the Xianbei. We will begin with one instance pertaining to the latter:

> 魏先之居幽都也，凿石为祖宗之庙于乌洛侯国西北。自后南迁，其地隔远。真君中，乌洛侯国遣使朝献，云石庙如故，民常祈请，有神验焉。其岁，遣中书侍郎李敞诣石室，告祭天地，以皇祖先妣配。祝曰："天子焘谨遣敞等用骏足、一元大武敢昭告于皇天之灵。自启辟之初，祐我皇祖，于彼土田。历载亿年，聿来南迁。惟祖惟父，光宅中原。克剪凶丑，拓定四边。冲人纂业，德声弗彰。岂谓幽遐，稽首来王。具知旧庙，弗毁弗亡。悠悠之怀，希仰余光。王业之兴，起自皇祖。绵绵瓜瓞，时惟多祜。敢以丕功，配飨于天。子子孙孙，福禄永延。"敞等既祭，斩桦木立之，以置牲体而还。后所立桦木生长成林，其民益神奉之。咸谓魏国感灵祇之应也。石室南距代京可四千余里。
>
> When the ancestors of the Wei were living in Youdu[4], they chiseled into the rock to make an ancestral temple northwest of the state of Wuluohu[5]. Afterwards, they migrated to the south and were separated by a great distance from that land.
>
> During the Zhenjun reign period (440 – 451), the state of Wuluohou sent an emissary to pay tribute at court, saying, "the stone temple is as of old. The people often pray there, and the spirits are efficacious."
>
> That same year, [the ruler of the Northern Wei] sent the Vice Director of the Secretariat, Li Chang, to visit the stone chamber, telling him to sacrifice to Heaven and Earth, and to match the august ancestor and ancestress with them. [Li Chang] exclaimed:
>
> "The Son of Heaven, [Tuoba] Tao[6], circumspectly commissioned Chang and others to use a fine horse and a fatted cow to make bold to inform the spirit of August Heaven. Since the beginning of the foundation [of our dynasty], they [i.e., the spirits of Heaven and Earth] have protected our august ancestors in that land. After passing through countless years, then it transpired that [our people] migrated to the south. Thus our ancestors and our fathers have dwelt gloriously in the Central Plains. They have eradicated evil and stabilized the four borders. [We,] the younger (i.e., brash) generations, have arrogated their enterprise, [so that] virtue and fame have not been made manifest.
>
> "How can it be said that you are secluded and remote? Kowtowing, we come [to pay our respects] to the sovereign. We fully realize that the old temple has not been destroyed or demolished. With anxious longing, we hopefully look up to your lingering light. The flourishing of the royal enterprise begins from the august ancestors. Spreading continuously like melon vines, in time there is much blessing. We make bold to sacrifice to Heaven through your (i.e., our ancestors') great accomplishments. May our sons and grandsons prosper forever."
>
> Having completed their sacrifice, Chang and the others cut down a birch tree and erected it [as a frame on which] to place the bodies of the victims, then they returned. Afterwards, the birch tree that they had erected grew into a grove worshipped all the more reverently. Everyone said that this was in response to the stimulation of the gods by the state of Wei. The stone chamber was more than four thousand tricents[7] distant from Daijing ("Replacement Capital") to the south[8].
>
> (*Wei shu*, *juan* 108A, pp. 2738—2739)

A passage from the "Xiongnu zhuan [Monograph on the Xiongnu]" in the *History of the Han*, *juan* 94A shows that the Xianbei sacrificial practice described above can be traced back to

the Xiongnu:

岁正月,诸长小会单于庭,祠。五月,大会龙城,祭其先、天地、鬼神。秋,马肥,大会蹛林,课较人畜计。

In the first month of the year, the elders had a small assembly in the shrine of the *chanyu's* court. In the fifth month they had a major assembly in Dragon City where they sacrificed to their forefathers, Heaven and Earth, the ghosts and spirits. In the autumn when the horses were fat, they had a great assembly at Surrounding (*dai* 蹛) Grove[9] to make an accounting (*ji* 计) of the numbers of people and domesticated animals[10].

(*Han shu*, *juan* 94A, p. 3752)

The commentaries accompanying this passage make clearer some of the details. Fu Qian explains: "蹛音带,匈奴秋社八月中皆会祭处也。" "*Dai* is pronounced dai. It is the place for sacrifice during the eighth month when all the Xiongnu have their autumnal community gathering." (*Ibid.*) The early Tang commentator, Yan Shigu, explains more fully and explicitly:

蹛者,绕林木而祭也。鲜卑之俗,自古相传,秋天之祭,无林木者尚竖柳枝,众骑驰绕三周乃止。此其遗法。计者,人畜之数。

*Dai* means to circle around a grove of trees and sacrifice. The Xianbei custom was passed down from antiquity as an autumnal sacrifice. In places where there is no grove, they still erect a willow branch and gallop around it three[11] times before stopping. This is their inherited practice. *Ji* ("calculate") refers to the numbers of people and domesticated animals.

(*Ibid.*)

Censuses of animals and people, particularly in the autumn, have been common throughout Inner Asian history (e.g., among the Turks, Mongols, and Manchus). (Meserve 2005).

The importance for the Xiongnu of sacrifice in a grove (or around a single tree or pole or branch representing a tree when no grove is available) has been documented by Egami Namio (1948). It is significant that the Manchus, nearly two thousand years later, also felt the need to erect a willow branch (or to find, when possible, a grove of cypress or plant as many as 49 pine trees) as the locus for their sacrificial shrines. (Meng 1959: 314 – 5, 319 – 21) Tree cults are common among Inner Asian peoples; while the willow is especially popular, many other types of trees assume cult-status. (Han 1982: esp. 278 – 87; Meserve 2005) Thus, the kind of tree that serves as the focus of worship is not so important as the sheer fact of there being a tree.

To return to the sacrificial ritual with which we began, a brief account of the state of Wuluohou 乌洛侯 (a minor tribe in the northern Greater Khingans [Da Xing'an 大兴安岭], said to be over 4, 500 li [approximately 1, 500 miles] distant from the Northern Wei capital [at that time Pingcheng 平城, in northern Shanxi]) in *Bei shi* 《北史》 (*History of the Northern Dynasties*) also mentions the ancestral cave of the Xianbei, but provides some details missing in the passage from the *Wei shu* translated above:



太武真君四年来朝,称其国西北有魏先帝旧墟石室,南北九十步,东西四十步,高七十尺,室有神灵,人多祈请。太武遣中书侍郎李敞告祭焉,刊祝文于石室之壁而还。

In the fourth year of the Zhenjun reign period of Emperor Taiwu (443), [a mission from the state of Wuluohou] came to have audience. They stated that northwest of their country there was an old, deserted stone chamber of the former rulers of the Wei. It measured 90 paces from north to south, 40 paces from east to west, and 70 *chi*[12] (feet) in height. In the chamber there were spirits, and people often prayed to them. Taiwu sent the Vice Director of the Secretariat, Li Chang, on a mission to inform [the ancestors] and to carry out a sacrifice to them. After engraving the text of an invocation on the wall of the stone chamber, Li Chang returned.

(*Bei shi*, *juan* 94, p. 3132)

The historicity of the alleged ancestral cave and the invocation associated with it was dramatically attested in July of 1980 when archeologists discovered an inscription in the Gaxian Cave 嘎仙洞 at 50°38′ north latitude and 123°38′ east longitude. The Gaxian Cave is approximately three miles (ten kilometers) northwest of the administrative center (Alihe Town) of the Oroqen Autonomous Banner, which is located in the northeastern corner of the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region. Oroqen is probably a derived form of Wuluohou (Middle Sinitic pronunciation **uo-lâk-γəu*), which further underscores the deep continuity of the cultic and sacrificial practices described in the passages quoted above. The cave is situated 25 meters up on a 100-meter-high granite cliff face. The triangular entrance is twelve meters high and nineteen meters wide, and the cave has a floor area of roughly two thousand square meters. (Mi 1981)

Yang Hong (2002: 27 Fig. 1) has published a photograph of the invocatory inscription in the Gaxian Cave[13], and the text has been transcribed by Mi Wenping (1981: 2). It is located on the western wall, approximately fifteen meters from the entrance. Like the inscription recorded in the *Wei shu* and the *Bei shi*, it is dated to the Zhenjun reign period, specifically the same year (443) as that given in the *Bei shi*. The contents of the inscription are essentially the same as those of the

invocation recorded in the *Wei shu*, but with considerable discrepancies. Clearly, though, the text of the invocation recorded in the dynastic histories is somehow closely related to that of the inscription in the Gaxian Cave.

Regardless of the factuality of the events recounted in the inscription (see note 8), it is obvious from the historical record cited above that the Xianbei of the Northern Wei acquired their horse-and-tree ceremony from the Xiongnu of the Han period. In attempting to trace the antecedents of this distinctive ceremony, where does the trail lead us? The answer is unmistakable: to the Indo-Europeans whose origins lay to the west.

## Indo-European Parallels

Already in the late Neolithic period, northern European peoples sacrificed horses to rivers. Since the victims were ritually slain with a flint dagger, it is presumed that they were considered to be noble creatures worthy of consecration to the river spirits. (Maringer 1974: 313) It is generally acknowledged that horse sacrifice was practiced already during the common Indo-European period (Koppers 1936: 284 – 285), and most IE stocks have evidence for the sacrifice of horses[14].

In his survey of the archeological data concerning the ritual treatment of the horse in the Pontic-Caspian region during the putative Proto-Indo-European period, ca. 4000 – 2500 BC, Mallory (1981) shows that the horse was held in special esteem among the major groups of the Early Kurgan tradition, specifically the Srednii Stog, Yamna (Pit-Grave), and Catacomb-Grave cultures. It is interesting that the deposition of the entire horse is extremely rare in Early Kurgan burials. Generally, only certain parts of the horse's anatomy are placed in the grave or pit. The most frequent deposition is the head (skull, jaw, or teeth), followed by the forelegs or hooves. Other parts of the horse are rarely represented. Furthermore, when more than one part of the horse is found in a burial, it is usually the head and the hooves. In some instances, the arrangement of the horse remains above a burial is in perfect conformity with the head-and-hooves ritual. (*Ibid.*, 213)

The head(s)-and-hooves ritual has been studied in a classic paper by Stuart Piggott (1962)[15]. He begins with an examination of archeological finds uncovered and analyzed by the Danish scholar Ole Klindt-Jensen[16] during excavations of Migration Period sites on the island of Bornholm, which lies close to the southeasternmost tip of Sweden, in particular at the Sorte Muld settlement (in this case the fifth century AD). Following Klindt-Jensen, and moving outward in space and time, Piggott points out that comparable finds of horse skulls and feet (but not other



parts of the skeleton), had been made in Danish and German bogs, at least one of which dated to the late Roman Iron Age. Similar deposits accompanied sixth-through eleventh-century burials in Hungary and Transylvania, as well as in South Russia from as early as the fourth century. Klindt-Jensen and Piggott both recognized that all of these finds could only be explained as resulting from rites in which the skin of the sacrificed horse, with head and hoofs still attached, played an essential role. Considering the available historical and ethnographic evidence, much of which is cited in later sections of the present paper, this configuration of skull and hoofs resulted from the practice of eating the flesh of the victim, but leaving its head, complete skin, and hooves *intact*. This ensemble was then hung on a pole (looking from a distance like an entire horse suspended against the sky) until the skin rotted away, leaving the skull and hooves to fall to the ground. As Piggott astutely closes his virtuosic, well-documented article, "Celtic seer and Siberian shaman had *much* in *common*." One cannot but agree with his perception that the widespread adoption of this highly distinctive practice attests to "a loosely-meshed network of contacts over much of Eurasia throughout subsequent[17] prehistory...." (*Ibid.*, p. 111)

The oldest evidence for the head-and-hoof ritual[18] is from the steppe Eneolithic (Copper Age) cemetery at S'ezzh'e (Sezzheye) in the Samara River Valley near Samara (Mallory and Adams 1997: 498b – 499a), east of the Middle Volga, dated to about 5000 BC. (Anthony 2005) This is highly significant, since it stems from the time of the very beginning of the Indo-European people and is located in what the majority of scholars consider to be the IE heartland[19]. The Eneolithic culture along the Middle Volga was succeeded by the Copper / Early Bronze Age culture known as Yamna (c. 3600 – 2200 BC), which spanned from the Danube to the Urals. Yamna was followed, in turn, by the Early Bronze Age Catacomb Culture (c. 3000 – 2200 BC) in roughly the same area. Both the Yamna and the Catacomb cultures continued the custom of burials of heads and hooves of horses with the deceased. (Mallory and Adams 1997: 278b – 279b) After these prehistoric instances[20], the practice has continued unabated among IE peoples and spread (as we shall see below) to many other groups with whom the Indo-Europeans came in contact as they traveled across Eurasia. In short, nothing could be more characteristic of the Proto-Indo-Europeans than the horse, and nothing could be more broadly characteristic of IE cultic practices concerning the horse than the head-and-hooves ritual.

Perhaps the best-known horse sacrifice of antiquity is the Indian *aśvamedha*, whose name preserves well the old IE roots. The first element of the compound is manifestly from IE * *ekwo-* ("horse"), while the second denotes a sacrificial offering of food and drink, probably related to

*mad*-("be drunk, intoxicated; rejoice; enjoy heavenly bliss [said of gods and deceased ancestors]"). It is noteworthy that there is an old Celtic proper name that is undoubtedly cognate with *aśvamedha*, namely IIPOMIIDVOS (i.e., *Epomeduos*). The *IIPO*-(*Epo*-) component of the name reminds us of Greek *hippo*-("horse"), and the *meduos* part is derived from IE * *medhu*-and would have indicated a "sweet drink, honey, mead."[21] The early Indo-Europeans were evidently "crazy about horses." (Puhvel 1955) Or, as Mallory (1989:136) puts it in more linguistically precise terms, "both the Indic and Celtic worlds still preserve the ancient Proto-Indo-European name of a horse-centred ceremony involving intoxication."

The *aśvamedha* was held during the spring in conjunction with the Old Indian inauguration of the king. The *aśvamedha* had a parallel in the Roman *Equus October* (or October Horse) when a stallion from the right side of a winning chariot team was selected for immolation. (Pascal 1981; Hubbell 1928) *Equus October* took place on the Ides (i.e., the fifteenth) of the Roman equivalent of the Old Indian month of *āśvayuja* ("month of the yoked horses," also called Āśvina). The victim was offered to the warrior deity, Mars, and then dismembered, with the head and "tail" (generally thought to be a euphemism for penis), the blood still dripping, being sent to different locations. The ultimate purpose of the Equus October was to insure an abundant harvest.

The Indo-Iranian peoples had a particularly close affinity with the horse. (Swennen 2004) Already in the *Rgveda*, hymns CLXII and CLXIII are devoted to the horse and its sacrifice[22]. It is particularly noteworthy that the horse is identified with the sun and Agni (fire, but here also functioning as a solar deity), and that the horse is said to draw the chariot of the sun across the sky. The same relationship (sun, horse, chariot) is explicitly embraced among many IE peoples, and there is abundant archeological evidence in support of this tightly knit complex of ideas (see, for example, the discussion of the Trundholm bronze chariot below under "Eurasian Continuities"; cf. Maringer 1981: Figs. 13, 16) from Europe, the Eurasian steppes, and other places where the Indo-Europeans went with their horses and chariots. This sun-horse-chariot symbolism also worked its way into Chinese myth and legend, and this has been perceptively discussed by Snow (2002: *passim*, but especially pp. 35 – 37).

There are many other crucial details in the Ṛgvedic hymns to the horse, such as its comparison with a deer[23], and the elaborate preparations for cooking it in a cauldron[24], which means that the victim's flesh must have been eaten. For the purposes of our present inquiry, however, let us concentrate only upon verse 6 of hymn CLXII:

> The hewers of the post and those who carry it, and those who carve the knob to deck the Horse's stake. . . . (Griffith, tr., 107b)



There were actually 21 posts (*yūpa*) required for the Ṛgvedic horse sacrifice, and they were made from the wood of six different types of trees. Moreover, special attention was paid to the wooden ring (*caṣāla*) at the top of the *yūpa*. With so many wooden posts surrounding it, the sacrificial horse may be said to have entered an artificial grove.

Despite the extraordinary importance of the *aśvamedha* in ancient India, the horse was not indigenous to the South Asian subcontinent. Because of the subtropical climate, the breeding of horses was seldom successful, hence the need for constant replenishment and revitalization from the lands to the north. The nonindigenousness of the horse in India notwithstanding, this noble animal occupied a central position in the society, religion, and ideology of the Vedic Aryans. (Stutley and Stutley 1984: 24) This would appear to support the argument that the ultimate origins of these cultural attributes lay in the steppes, whence came the tamed (< PIE√*demə*- ["constrain, force, break in"]) horse[25].

The Iranians, the other half of the Indo-Iranian dyad, were masters of the horse. In the early stages, the horse was used mainly for pulling war chariots, but gradually it came to be used for riding as well. This is attested in the *Avesta*, where heroes are described as entering battlefields or sacrificial venues "on horseback" (*Yašt* 5.51, 10.11; *Yasna* 11.2).

> Horses were also offered to gods, and the Ābān Yašt celebrates many Iranian kings and heroes who sacrificed one hundred horses, one thousand oxen, and ten thousand sheep to Arədvī Sūrā Anāhitā, asking her for special boons. The formula well indicates the value of the horse, and indeed, an Avestan passage records that an excellent (*aγryō.təmō*) horse was worth eight pregnant cows. (Shahbazi 1985 – 1987: 725a)

Greek historians wrote of horse sacrifice as being a common rite during a Persian monarch's funeral. The Byzantines referred to the worship of a Ἔνοπλος Ἵππος (literally, "harnessed horse") among the Persians in the 7th century. The Sogdians (Middle Iranian people of Central Asia) observed a special celebration, called the *čahārom*, which centered upon the immolation of a horse, as attested in their art and religious literature. (Compareti 2003: 201)

Herodotus (IV. 72) provides a gruesome, detailed description of the Scythians' voracious appetite for human and equine sacrifice upon the death of one of their kings:

> When a year is gone by, further ceremonies take place. Fifty of the best of the late king's attendants are taken, all native Scythians – for, as bought slaves are unknown in the country, the Scythian kings choose any of their subjects that they like, to wait on

> them – fifty of these are taken and strangled, with fifty of the most beautiful horses. When they are dead their bowels are taken out, and the cavity cleaned, filled full of chaff, and straightway sewn up again. This done, a number of posts are driven into the ground, in sets of two pairs each, and on every pair half the felly of a wheel is placed archwise; then strong stakes are run lengthways through the bodies of the horses from tail to neck, and they are mounted upon the fellies, so that the felly in front supports the shoulders of the horse, while that behind sustains the belly and quarters, the legs dangling in midair; each horse is furnished with a bit and bridle, which latter is stretched out in front of the horse, and fastened to a peg. The fifty strangled youths are then mounted severally on the fifty horses. To effect this, a second stake is passed through their bodies along the course of the spine to the neck; the lower end of which projects from the body, and is fixed into a socket, made in the stake that runs lengthwise down the horse. The fifty riders are thus ranged in a circle round the tomb, and so left.
>
> (Herodotus 1942: 318 – 319)

This is not even to mention the original funeral rites that attended the death of the Scythian king, together with all the sacrifices of men, women, and horses that occurred during the construction of the tomb and the raising of a vast mound above it[26]. For our purposes, what is most notable about the ceremonies that took place a year after the death of the Scythian king is the extravagant display of sacrificed horses set up on wooden frames.

The sacrifice of horses among the Scythians was by no means restricted solely to the funerals of kings and chieftains. According to Herodotus (IV. 61), the favorite victims of the Scythians were horses, and the Massagetae sacrificed horses to the sun, their only god, "giving to the swiftest of the gods the swiftest of all mortal creatures" (*ibid.*, I. 216). (Thordarson 1985 – 87: 731a) Inasmuch as the Scythians and Massagetae were Iranian peoples (and there were others who adhered to similar customs) who roamed the steppes widely from the Black Sea to East Asia during the first millennium BC and the first millennium AD, it is easy to understand how they could have been responsible for transmitting such characteristically Indo-European practices from west to east.

The preponderance of the evidence just cited (and much more could be adduced) indicates clearly that the horse played an important role in Indo-European culture from its inception (von Negelein 1903), and that horse sacrifice was an integral part of the ritual life of the majority of ancient Indo-European peoples. But what of trees? Did the Indo-Europeans also have a close relationship with trees? And, furthermore, were trees and horses somehow linked in the imagination



or psyche of the Indo-Europeans?

The best-known, relatively up-to-date study on this subject is Friedrich (1970). But there have been many other articles and monographs written about the intimate association between Indo-Europeans and trees. For a short, authoritative survey, see Friedrich's articles in Mallory and Adams (1997: 598a – 601a and passim), where we find the following perceptive comment:

> To a degree that goes beyond other semantic sets, the arboreal terms and the tree names in particular indicate a relatively strong western-central area that includes Celtic, Italic, Germanic, Baltic and Slavic. Among these Slavic shows the highest rate of mutual correspondence, which may suggest that its ecological area corresponds relatively closely with that of the earliest Indo-Europeans.

As with the horse, so it would appear with trees that the IE homeland may have lain in the region with which the Slavs were most closely related.

The first volume of part I of James George Frazer's celebrated *The Golden Bough* begins with a chapter entitled "The King of the Wood," the first section of which is about Diana and Virbius. (1935 I: esp. 20 – 21) Virbius was a local, Italian deity worshipped with Diana (Greek Artemis) at the sacred grove of Aricia, and was held to be the presiding genius of the wood and the chase. For some, he was thought of as the sun. He was, moreover, identified as a reincarnation of Hippolytus, a name obviously derived from the Greek for "horse." According to legend, Hippolytus was a chaste huntsman and a favorite of Artemis. He was slain by horses (his alter egos) and raised from the dead by Æsculapius (the Greek god of medicine), then taken by the goddess to the sacred grove of Aricia in Latium, where he was worshipped as Virbius, a deity of vegetation. Frazer observes that spirits of corn (i.e., grain) are often represented in the form of horses. Thus we see a close interrelationship among horses, the sun, sacred groves, and crops. The second volume of part I of *The Golden Bough* opens with chapter 8, which returns to the theme of the King of the Wood, and, in chapters 9 and 10, Frazer respectively reviews in great detail "The Worship of Trees" and "Relics of Tree-Worship in Modern Europe." With enormous erudition, these themes have been further elucidated by Robert Graves in *The White Goddess* (1948). Mannhardt (1875; *1905*) also emphasized the centrality for Northern Europeans of cultic ceremonies held in groves and forests. There can be no mistaking the sacrality of trees, groves, woods, and forests for many ancient and medieval European groups.

The Germanic peoples, in particular, were devoted to trees:

> Germanic cultural fondness for tree symbolism appears to have been widespread,

with other patron trees such as Thor's Oak appearing in surviving accounts (8th century) and Ahmad ibn Faḍlān's account of his encounter with the Scandinavian Rus tribe in the early 10th century, describing them as tattooed from "fingernails to neck" with dark blue "tree patterns." (*Wikipedia*, 5/16/06 2:31 PM)

It is well known that the Scandinavian peoples were fond of making human sacrifice in sacred bogs. They did not, however, limit themselves to consecrating chosen individuals to the spirits of the bogs, since they also sunk bronze implements and other precious objects in them. What is not so widely known is the fact that they also carried out head-and-hooves rituals above them or in their vicinity. One may still see at Lejre (Simek 1993: 187 – 188) in Denmark a stunning reconstruction of such sacrifices, with horse skins (including head and hooves intact) suspended from wooden frames[27]. (Fig. 1) In fact, the set-up is quite similar to that described by Herodotus for the Scythians (see above), with a pole being thrust along the length of the spine to the head of the horse, the skin and legs dangling below, and the pole being suspended from a simple wooden framework.

The sacrificial treatment of the horse in Sweden is documented for the eleventh century by Adam of Bremen[28] in his history (IV. 27):

> It is the custom moreover every nine years[29] for a common festival of all the provinces of Sweden to be held at Uppsala. Kings and commoners one and all send their gifts to Uppsala, and what is more cruel than any punishment, even those who have accepted Christianity have to buy immunity from these ceremonies. The sacrifice is as follows: of every living creature they offer nine head, and with the blood of those it is the custom to placate the gods, but the bodies are hanged in a grove which is near the temple; so holy is that grove to the heathens that each tree in it is presumed to be divine by reason of the victim's death and putrefaction. There also dogs and horses hang along with men. One of the Christians told me that he had seen seventy-two[30] bodies of various kinds hanging there, but the incantations which are usually sung at this kind of sacrifice are various and disgraceful, and so we had better say nothing about them.
>
> (quoted in Davidson 1988: 59)

Adam's Catholic disapprobation notwithstanding, the extreme veneration for groves and the trees within them comes through clearly in this passage. In the sacrifice of men and horses (dogs were particularly important to the Scythians and other Iranian peoples [Mair 1998]), the commonality with Scythian sacrifice is also evident, except that the Scythians——denizens of the steppe——



had to resort to posts on which to hang their sacrificial victims, rather than sacred trees. There are, more-over, literary records made by the Vikings themselves which attest to their practice of the peculiar impaling ceremony described for the Scythians and many other Eurasian peoples throughout this study. (Boyle 1963: 207n33; Chadwick 1942: 76)

Jones and Pennick (1995: 139 – 40) point out that "Ceremonial horse slaughter for a sacral meal of horseflesh was part of northern European Paganism." They go on to explain that the horse was the totemic beast of Woden / Odin, and that the church consequently made determined (but by no means entirely successful) efforts to eradicate it throughout the medieval period and even into early modern times.

The connection between Odin and the horse is cemented through what is the grandest tree of all, Yggdrasill (or Ygdrasil). In Norse mythology, this is the great World Ash Tree whose roots and branches hold together heaven, earth, and hell (indeed, all the nine worlds of Norse cosmology [at the bottom of which lay a spring to water the great tree]) a veritable *axis mundi*[31]. The name is commonly interpreted to mean "Terrible Horse" ("Terrible" being an epithet of Odin), or "The Horse of Ygg (the Ogre)."[32] Yggdrasill was also conceived of as Odin's gallows tree, the gallows being compared to a steed (*drasil*) on which men rode to their death[33].

In his *Germanic Mythology*, the great German philologist and folklorist, Jakob Grimm (1785 – 1863), provides extensive material that is relevant to the present inquiry:

> In the oldest times chiefly horses seem to have been sacrificed; undoubtedly their flesh was universally eaten before the introduction of Christianity. Missionaries found nothing so repellant about the pagans as the latter not abandoning the killing of horses and enjoying of their flesh. The cutting off of the horse's head, which was not eaten but dedicated to the God, must not be overlooked in this connection.
>
> ... Among all animal sacrifices, that of the horse was the most noble and the most solemn. Our forefathers had it in common with several Slavic and Finnish peoples, with Persians and Indians. The horse was held by them all to be a particularly sacred animal....
>
> A temple is simultaneously a wood. What we think of as a walled building merges, the farther back we go, into a sacred place untouched by human hands, in a grove and enclosed by dense trees. There the God dwells, veiling his form in the rustling foliage of the boughs. There is the place at which the hunter has to present him with the game he has killed and the herdsman his horses, oxen and rams.

> . . . Here and there a God may haunt a mountain top, a cave in the rocks, a river. But the solemn general worship by the people had its seat in the grove.
>
> . . . In the course of centuries and until the introduction of Christianity, the custom was served of worshipping the deity in the sacred forests and trees. Among the Saxons and Frisians the worship in the groves lasted far longer. In various parts of Lower Saxony and Westphalia traces of sacred oaks have been preserved until recent times, to which the people showed a half-pagan, half-Christian reverence.
>
> (Grimm 1997: 10, 12 – 13 [with minor changes])

Thus we observe among the Indo-Europeans, virtually from the time of their inception, a peculiar concatenation of veneration for horses and for trees. The horsehead-and-hooves ritual, in essence, combines the two forms of worship into a remarkably impressive sacrificial ritual. In its earliest stages, the horsehead-and-hooves ritual was uniquely characteristic of Indo-European peoples. As the Indo-Europeans (and their equestrian arts) spread across Eurasia, however, they carried this distinctive form of sacrificial ceremony (together with other aspects of horse culture) with them, transmitting it to many other groups who were denizens of the steppe.

## Eurasian Continuities

At Botai, an Eneolithic site southeast of the Urals in the northern part of Kazakhstan dating to c. 3600 – 3100 BC, hundreds of thousands of horse bones have been discovered. Aside from being used for consumption, the horse had other functions at Botai. For example, we see an interesting ritual practice involving parts of the horse. The people there buried the tops of horse skulls next to articulated cervical vertebrae in ritual pits around the outside of their houses. The heads pointed to the northeast (spring kill, facing the rising sun), east (probably late summer), or southeast (autumn kill, the most frequent). (Olsen 2005; Olsen 2003: esp. 98a – 100b)

Head and neck burials were very common in the Bronze Age in Mongolia. These are often found in association with a particular type of burial complex called a *khirigsuur* (also spelled *khereksur*). This consists of a burial under a large stone mound with a square (or, less often, round) stone enclosure. While there are numerous *khirigsuurs* in Mongolia, we may take the site of Urt Bulagyn (KYR1) as typical, though larger than most. Urt Bulagyn is located in the valley of the Khanuy River, to the north of the Khangay mountain range in Arkhangai Aimag. The central mound has yet to be excavated, but several of the satellite mounds have yielded extremely interesting results. All together, there are approximately 1, 750 small mounds around the outside of the rectangular wall made of stones. Concentrated on the eastern and southern sides, each mound typically has a horse head and neck in the center under a pile of stones. All of the horse heads point to the east or southeast (120° or slightly less), in all likelihood a solar orientation. At other *khirigsuurs*, satellite mounds contained various combinations of head, neck, and hoof remains. The orientations of the heads range from east to southeast (around 90° to about 135°. Some of the *khirigsuurs* give evidence of growth and use over an extended period of time. The upper and lower limits of $C^{14}$ dates obtained from *khirigsuurs* in the Khanuy Valley thus far range from 1390 to 680 BC, with the average hovering around 1000 BC. (Olsen 2005; Allard and Erdenebaatar 2005)



It is not surprising that the horse is closely associated with the Sun God in many areas of the Eurasian steppe and beyond. Indeed, one of the most evocative Bronze Age works of art from Northern Europe is the famous Trundholm bronze sun chariot, which dates to c. 1650 BC. The Trundholm sun chariot consists of a model of a horse on four wheels drawing a disk, which is also on wheels (two in this case). The disk is gold-plated on one side, to represent the sun, while the other side may have been meant to represent the moon. The diameter of the disk is 25. 9 cm. and the overall length of the entire vehicle is 59 cm. It was recovered from the bog at Trundholm, on the island of Zealand between Jutland (Denmark) and Sweden[34]. (Hammond 1988: 117)

The monumental kurgans at Arzhan (Tuva, Uyuk Valley, in the Altai region of the Russian Federation) provide further insight into the lavish use of horses for sacrifice by peoples of the Eurasian steppe during the first millennium BC. Arzhan kurgan I was constructed during the 9th-8th centuries BC, making it the source of the oldest-known early Scythian artifacts of the Eurasian steppe. It was 4 meters in height and 120 meters in diameter, which gives a good idea of its enormous proportions. Beneath the mound, nearly a hundred wooden burial chambers were arrayed in concentric, interlocking circles around a central tomb. It is estimated that this huge kurgan would have required no less than 1, 500 men to build in a period of seven or eight days. Found within the kurgan were the complete bodies of 160 fully caparisoned horses, plus the remains of 300 additional horses whose flesh had been eaten. (Sōma 2005).

Arzhan kurgan II, which yielded massive amounts of golden objects, also belongs to the early Scythian period, although to the latter part of this period——approximately the 7th c. BC. Among the 9, 300 objects recovered from the site by a joint German-Russian team working there from 2000 to 2002, fully 5, 700 are made of gold, making it one of the richest archeological inventories ever found in Siberia and the Eurasian steppe. Within the kurgan of Arzhan II, a total of 26 graves have

been excavated. For the purposes of our present investigation, the most vital is number 16, significantly positioned in the southeastern sector of the kurgan. In this carefully constructed grave were deposited the remains of 14 horses, complete with bronze bits, cheekpieces, and other fittings, as well as golden ornaments for the mane, and so forth. This grave of elaborately sacrificed horses was covered by a large quantity of massive stone slabs, signaling its special ritualistic importance. (Parzinger 2003; Čugunov 2003)

A little less than a thousand kilometers to the southwest of Arzhan lies the vast complex of cemeteries at Charwighul (Chawuhugou), south of the Tängri Tagh (Tian Shan ["Heavenly Mountains"]) near Khotunsumbul (Hejing), along the north central rim of the Tarim Basin. A typical tomb here is 83M18 in Cemetery I. The main tomb is a stone-lined pit which was covered with massive monoliths and is marked on the surface by a circle of stones. Along the northwestern and western perimeter of the grave were found several ancillary burials, including one with a single horse skull and four thighbones, one with two horse skulls and four hooves, and another one with one horse skull and four hooves, plus the grave of an infant. C14 dates at this cemetery range from 825 ±80 to 525 ±80 BC. Charwighul was probably associated with Wusun, or perhaps Scythians, in any event Iranian peoples of some sort. At Zaghunluq, near Chärchän (Qiemo) along the southeastern rim of the Tarim Basin, horse skulls and forelegs are found in burials from a similar time period. At Moron in northern Mongolia, there is a *khirigsuur* known as Ulaan Uushig I, which dates to around the tenth century BC. All along the eastern edge of the site (outside the square enclosure) there are 21 small stone mounds, among which five small pits typically yielded a horse skull, four hooves, and a vertebra. (Sôma 2005)

The ritual practices discussed above in this section all preceded, or were contemporary with, the horse sacrifices of the Xiongnu and Särbi described near the beginning of this paper. The same sorts of treatment of the horse were maintained in Asia during the succeeding centuries. Boyle (1965:145) recognizes a form of horse sacrifice among the 13th- and 14th-century Mongols "as a late survival of a tradition which goes back to the great Scythian barrows on the Kuban[35] in the 6th century B. C." The Mongol practice of erecting one or more horse skins over a burial site is documented by travelers from the west: Giovanni da Pian del Carpini, Vincent of Beauvais, Ricoldo da Montecroce, Kirakos of Ganjak, and Ibn-Baṭṭūṭa. As reconstructed from these various sources, the procedure was roughly as follows: "First the horse was ridden around until it dropped of exhaustion; its head was then washed in kumys, its bones and intestines removed and a pole was thrust in at the belly and out through the mouth." (*Ibid.*, p. 147)



It is worth quoting one of these sources in more detail. Here is the testimony of the Franciscan friar Giovanni da Pian del Carpini (ca. 1180 – 1252), who was the first notable European traveler in the Mongol empire:

> And they bury with him a mare and her foal and a horse with bridle and saddle, and another horse they eat and fill its skin with straw, and this they stick up on two or four poles, so that in the next world he may have a dwelling in which to make his abode and a mare to provide him with milk, and that he may be able to increase his horses and have horses on which to ride[36].

A still more graphic, first-hand account of this peculiar form of ritual as practiced by the Mongols is provided by the Armenian historian Kirakos of Ganjak (1201 – 1272), who had been captured by the Mongols and forced to serve as one of their secretaries. Writing around 1241, he vividly describes the sacrifice:

> And when they wished to have a memorial of the dead man, they ripped open the belly of a horse and pulled out all the flesh without bones, and then they burnt the intestines and bones and sewed up the skin of the horse as though it had its whole body. Having sharpened a great pole they thrust it in the belly and pulled it out through the mouth; and thus they raised it up on a tree or some elevated place.
>
> (Boyle 1963: 204 – 207)

A passage by the Armenian historian Movsēs Dasxurançi (Kalankatuaçi), à propos the mission of the Armeno-Albanian bishop Israyel in 681 – 682 to the Khazars (or vassals of the Khazars) in Northern Daghestan, reveals deep affinities with the worship of trees and with horse sacrifices among the Northern Europeans discussed earlier in this paper. According to Boyle (1965:148), Movsēs Dasxurançi states that "this people used to sacrifice horses to oak-trees dedicated to Tengri[37], pouring the animals' blood over the trees and suspending their heads and skins from the branches." Boyle goes on to comment that "This is a ritual which survived into modern times amongst the [Finnish and Turkic] forest peoples along the [Middle] Volga." Here I wish to reiterate that the general pattern would appear to be that of a preference for display of the horse's remains in trees, but that where trees were scarce or lacking altogether (as in many parts of the steppe), resort to posts and poles procured from elsewhere was acceptable.

Similar equine sacrificial customs were adopted by the Old Türks of Central and Inner Asia as a crucial component of their burial practices. (Ôsawa 2002) (Fig. 2) Medieval European and Arabian travelers record grave monuments consisting of horse carcasses or horse hides among the Cum-

ans and various Altaic peoples of Central Asia. (Roux 1963: esp. 135ff; Boyle 1965: 145 – 150; Thordarson 1985 – 1987: 731a)

During the mid-19th century, at the spring festival Kalmucks in the valley of the Ichurish in the Altai held sacrifices to their deity. The rich gave horses, while the poor offered sheep or goats. The victim was slain and then flayed; its skin was raised on a pole above a framework, placed with its head facing east. The flesh was cooked in a large cauldron, and the tribe held a great feast. (Czaplicka 1914: 304; quoting T. W. Atkinson, *Oriental and Western Siberia* [1858: 382 – 383])

Radloff (1968 [1893]: 20 – 25) describes in detail a Siberian horse sacrifice conducted by a shaman, including the words of his chants and songs. In this case too, the pelt of the victim, with head and hooves still attached, is suspended from a long pole. (Fig. 3) Among the Mongol Buryat, the skin and head of a horse are symbolically raised up towards Heaven on a pole during the annual tribal sacrifice. (Chadwick 1942: 76) (Fig. 4) Eliade (1964: 190 – 97, esp. 192) provides a graphic description of the killing of the sacrificial victim and the display of its pelt and bones on a long pole. (Fig. 5) He also notes that the same ceremony exists among many Altaic tribes and the Teleut, and that the sacrifice of the head and long bones is practiced among Arctic peoples as well (though naturally using reindeer instead of horses).

Finally, Sandor Bökönyi (1978 – 1979) has documented the vestigial persistence of these rituals in modern Hungary, where horse skulls are mounted on fenceposts.

This has by no means been intended as an exhaustive account of Eurasian horse sacrifice ceremonies, but rather as a representative sampling. One thing that emerges clearly from this survey is the widespread adoption of the head-and-hooves ritual by numerous different groups who lived on the steppe, or who were in close contact with steppe peoples regardless of ethnic or linguistic affiliation.

## Conclusion

It is telling that the major sacrifices of the Xiongnu and Xianbei (as with the Romans and other Indo-Europeans) were in autumn when the horses were at their fattest and healthiest for consumption. The Kazakhs and Mongolians still observe this custom, although the Mongolians do not eat horse very much. The survival of the Xiongnu-Xianbei horse-and-tree ritual may be seen in what the Mongolians still do today. They place a stick in a stone pile (*oboo*, also spelled *obo*, *obu*, *obugu*, *obun*, *etc.*) and put horse heads, vodka bottles, and other offerings around the base. To decorate and sanctify the "tree," they tie blue prayer scarves onto it. When a traveler comes up to an *oboo*, he or she places a small stone on the pile and walks clockwise around the *oboo* three times[38]. The persistence of ancient Eurasian horse-related customs is also witnessed among Kazakhs who have moved from Mongolia to Kazakhstan. They still put horse skins on sticks, especially if someone is ill. (Olsen 2005)



Human beings engage in animal sacrifice for a variety of reasons: to appease or please the gods, to seek blessings, to avoid disasters, to celebrate good fortune, to mourn the loss of a leader or loved one, and so on. The domestic animals sacrificed include dogs, pigs, chickens, cattle, goats, and sheep. As we have seen, horses were also sacrificed, but it seems as if they were sacrificed less often than the other domestic animals, probably because they were considered to be more valuable and more loved. Thus, when human beings did sacrifice horses, it was often at moments of extraordinary importance, such as the death or coronation of a king or ruler, or at a major (national) festival. The horse sacrifice was the most aristocratic of sacrifices, and it was often carried out in particularly sacred spaces, such as hallowed groves. Furthermore, it was especially among the people of the steppe, above all the Indo-Europeans who domesticated the horse and those who succeeded them (the Xiongnu, the Xianbei, the Mongols, etc.), that horse sacrifice was performed——with the utmost solemnity.

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## Notes

[1] As in previous papers on related themes, by "north(west)ern" I mean both "northern" and "northwest-

ern" (in relation to the East Asian Heartland [EAH]).

[2] One extraordinarily large sacrificial horse pit was discovered next to the tomb of Duke Jing 景公 (r. 547 –490 BC) of the state of Qi 齐 (at modern Heyatou in Linzi 临淄, Shandong Province). It is about 200 meters long and contains the skeletons of more than 600 sacrificed horses. (Chang and Xu 2005: 233, Fig. 7.42) The sight of such an enormous number of horses lined up in pairs and stretching into the distance is overwhelming. Clearly the Duke of Qi was striving to make a statement through this grossly prodigal sacrifice. For horse-poor Shandong, the significance of his act is all the more profound. The amount of resources that must have been expended to procure such a vast amount of sacrificial victims is stupendous. It is no wonder that, during the Shang period, the people of the EAH——surely not without envy——referred to certain of their horse-rich nomadic neighbors as *duoma* 多马 ("[having] many horses").

[3] The contentious question of the identity of the Xiongnu 匈奴 is far too complicated to address here. Suffice it to say that the name Xiongnu (Old Sinitic **xiung-no*) is clearly related to the ethnonym Hun, since they are equated via Sogdian *xwn* (Hun). The latter occurs in the famous Sogdian letters of the early fourth century (311 AD), which explicitly identify the Xiongnu as *xwn*. (Sims-Williams 1996: 47) This does not, however, mean that the ethnic composition of the Xiongnu and Hun confederations were identical. To be sure, as is natural for highly mobile, clan-based, steppe confederacies, their ethnic makeup was liable to shift in accordance with time and circumstance. Still, while the ethnic composition of the Xiongnu and the Huns may have varied, there is no reason to doubt their fundamental political and cultural identity. (Wright 1997; de la Vaissière 2005)

The role of the Xiongnu has been a major theme of research into the dynamics of the interrelationship between the steppe, nomadic zone and the settled, agricultural zone in East Asian history during the late first millennium BC and early first millennium AD. See Barfield (1989) and Di Cosmo (2002) for two different, yet equally illuminating, approaches to the question.

[4] Youdu means roughly "in the northern area where they had gathered"; lit., "secluded capital."

[5] A branch of the Xianbei people. As so often happens with words and names transcribed into Sinitic, their name is written in different ways, and they are undoubtedly the same people as the Wuluohun 乌罗浑 (Middle Sinitic pronunciation **'uo-lâ-yuən*). While modern ethnographers have not made a connection with the tiny (around 7,000 individuals in 1990) minority nationality (*shaoshu minzu* 少数民族) of today known as the Oroqen (MSM Elunchun 鄂伦春; they are also called variously Chilins, Orochs, Orochels, Orochens, Orochons, Orochans, Oronchans, Orochens, Orochis, Oroquens, Solons, Soluns, and Suluns), there are compelling reasons to link the early medieval Wuluohou / Wuluohun with the Oroqen. Aside from the obvious similarity of their names, the Oroqen live in precisely the same area as did the Wuluohun, namely, in Huma, Xunke, Aihui, and Jiayin counties of Heilongjiang Province and in the Hulun Buir League of the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region. Their language is Tungusic and is thought by ethnolinguists to be closely related to (perhaps even a dialect of) Evenk. The Oroqen ethnonym is generally interpreted as meaning "mountain people" or "reindeer people (i.e., herders). For a valuable introduction to the history and ethnography of the Oroqen, together with a helpful bibliography concerning them, see Olson (1998: 267—70). For anthropological (including physical anthropological) data about the Oroqen and photographs of them, see Du and Yip (1993: 39 – 42). For the folklore of the Oroqen, with due attention to horses, trees, and solar themes, see Stuart and Li (1994).



[6] That is, Taiwu Di, the third Northern Wei emperor, 408 – 452, r. 423 – 452.

[7] Approximately 1,333 miles. This is a very crude approximation of the actual distance from the far northeastern part of Inner Mongolia, where the Gaxian Cave is located, to Datong in northern Shanxi, where the Northern Wei had its capital until Xiaowendi moved it farther south to Luoyang in the year 493. The actual distance is about 900 miles (roughly 1,400 kilometers).

[8] For a detailed historical and political analysis of this and related texts, see Pearce (forthcoming). Most modern scholars hold that the legend of the ancestral cave-shrine of the Northern Wei rulers was concocted by Emperor Taiwu in collusion with his advisers, and perhaps also with the collaboration of the Wuluohu. In any event, the entire episode of the fifth-century discovery of the shrine is deeply revealing of the ethnic complexities and international relations of the time.

[9] In accordance with the commentary of Yan Shigu, this might more precisely and felicitously be rendered as "Grove of Circumambulation."

[10] The exact same passage (with one tiny exception) occurs in *Shi ji*, *juan* 110, p. 2892, commentaries on p. 2893. The only difference between the text in the *Han shu* and that in the *Shi ji* is that, for the *long* of Longcheng 龙城 (Dragon City) the latter aberrantly has 茏城 (City of *Polygonum orientale* [prince's feather]).

[11] Many of the old Indo-European horse sacrifices had some noticeable aspect of threeness inherent in them (e.g., the *aśvamedha* [to be described below] lasted three days, the flesh of the horse was offered to three different deities or three estates [as in the Roman *October Equus*, also to be described below], and so forth), and this naturally leads to a consideration of the tripartite nature of society and myth (the so-called "functions") as analyzed by Georges Dumézil (1898 – 1986), but a full discussion of this topic lies beyond the scope of the present inquiry.

[12] One *chi* among the Northern Wei was equal to 29.6 cm.

[13] In the same article, Yang shows photographs of the inside and outside of the cave, and discusses the art of the Tabgatch Särbi during this period.

[14] For a brief but enlightening introduction to horse sacrifice among the early Indo-European peoples, see Mallory (1989: 135 – 37).

[15] See also Maringer (1981: 191 – 192) for additional evidence, references, and penetrating comments on the head-and-hooves ritual.

[16] References to the pertinent works of Klindt-Jensen and other scholars may be found in the first half-dozen

notes of Piggott's article.

[17] By which Piggott means subsequent to the Sub-Mesolithic communities of the early second millennium BC.

[18] In the archeological record, the "head and hooves" cult usually shows up as the head and hooves of the animal being found just below the surface of the burial. This, however, reflects what are merely the remnants of the entire skin of the animal with the head and hooves still intact, but all other parts (including flesh and bones) having been removed before display on a wooden frame. After the wood and the skin disappear, all that is left are the head and the hooves.

[19] See, for example, Maringer (1981: 177), who holds that "[t]he domesticated horse emerged in the wooded steppe north of the Caspian and Black Seas" at a time (early fifth millennium BC) and presumably place that were essentially coterminous with the rise of the Indo-European peoples.

[20] See Piggott (1962) for many more examples of prehistoric sites where horse-hide (i.e., heads and hooves) burials occurred.

[21] As has often been remarked, the most widely accepted early borrowing from IE into Sinitic is the word for "honey" (Modern Standard Mandarin *mì* 蜜): Common Tocharian *myit* > Old Sinitic **mit*, Middle Sinitic **mjit* (Carling 2005:55). Cf. modern English "mead," Sanskrit *madhu*, Avestan *maδu-*("alcoholic beverage"), Greek *methy*("wine"), Old Church Slavonic *medu*, Lithuanian *medus*, Old Irish *mid*.

[22] Horse sacrifice is also the subject of the 14th book of the epic *Mahābhārata*, the Āsvamedhika *parvan*, in which Yudhiṣṭhira performs the *aśvamedha* after he is crowned emperor.

[23] In *Ṛgveda*, Book 1, CLXIII, the sacrificed horse is explicitly compared to a deer. The horse is even said to have horns!

Verse 9: "Horns made of gold hath he."

Verse 11: "Thy horns are spread abroad in all directions."

(tr. Griffith)

Commentators have engaged in the wildest contortions and circumlocutions (the "horns" [śṛṅga] actually signify hairs of the mane, the hoofs, etc.) in their vain efforts to explain these ostensibly odd formulations. In my opinion, when properly set in the context of the ultimate ancestry of the authors of the *Ṛgveda*, the description of the horse as a deer is not so strange after all. As I shall explain momentarily, there is good reason to believe that the Aryans truly possessed a deep memory of an intimate, primordial association with the deer, specifically the reindeer.

The latter verse (11) especially sounds more like it is describing the antlers of a deer rather than the horns of a bovine or ovicaprid. The fact that, in this verse, the word for "horn" is in the plural rather than the dual is not probative against an interpretation of the appendages as antlers, since the latter have a multiplicity of spreading branches that do seem to go "in all directions." In any event, the Rgvedic cervidization of the horse reminds one of Scythian steppe art (e.g., at the Iron Age [ca. 5th c. BC] site of



Pazyryk in the Altai Mountains), where horses were often outfitted to resemble deer. What possible rational explanation could there be for this seemingly bizarre custom? I believe that it was because humans most likely first domesticated (herded, yoked, and rode) reindeer——which are far more placid than horses (personal observation of large, diffuse herds at close range in the far north of Sweden), and only then domesticated the horse by analogy based on their experience with reindeer. Hence, the horse may be thought of as a sort of surrogate reindeer.

According to this theory, human beings who had become acculturated to the reindeer during the latter stages of the Pleistocene would have migrated southward (with the retreat of the glaciers) during the early stages of the Holocene. As they did so, however, they would gradually have moved out of the range of the reindeer and into the habitat of the horse. This theory, which I am only able to sketch briefly here, accords well with the old notion of a northern origin of the Aryans, although——in my estimation——the boreal antecedents of the Aryans would have had to go back beyond their own inception to the very beginnings of the Indo-Europeans. Indeed, I hypothesize that it was the domestication of the horse itself, modeled on the deep familiarity of their forefathers with the reindeer during the first portion of the Holocene, that enabled the emerging Indo-Europeans to tame the horse, and that this very act——which took place in the southern Urals——was the defining moment of their birth as a distinct cultural and linguistic entity. I include language as an essential criterion because that is, after all, the touchstone for a family such as Indo-European, but also because the rising Indo-Europeans would naturally have required a fresh vocabulary and mode of expression to accord with their new environment and, above all, their intensely symbiotic relationship with the horse.

[24] Note the importance of such vessels for the peoples of the steppe. The cauldron also figured prominently in the Irish analogue to the *aśvamedha*. (Mallory and Adams 1997:278a; Mallory 1989: 136)

[25] For the northern origins of the Aryans, see note 23. The situation with regard to the horse is similar for China, though yet more attenuated, undoubtedly as a result of East Asia being even farther from the homeland of the domesticated horse than South Asia. (Mair 2005a: 217n89)

[26] Those familiar with the Shang royal burials at Anyang will immediately recognize the striking resemblance they bear to Scythian royal burials as evidenced in historical descriptions and through archeological evidence. Since the Scythians (first millennium BC), however, came after the time of the Shang royal burials (12th c. BC), the obvious similarity must be due to derivation from an earlier ancestral culture.

[27] See "Lejre Experimental Centre: Sacrificial Bog" on the Web for striking color photographs of such sacrifices.

[28] Adam of Bremen was a renowned church historian in whose works, among many other interesting things, is to be found the first mention of Vinland, the part of North America reached by Leif Eriksson (fl. ca. 1000).

[29] The custom of performing such *blót* ("blood sacrifices") every nine years must have been common

throughout Scandinavia, since it was also observed at Lejre, among other places. (Davidson 1988: 59) Our Modern English word "blessing" is derived from Old English *blōēdsian*, *blēdsian*, *blētsian* ("to bless, wish happiness, consecrate") < Germanic **blōdan* ("blood"). Hence *blōēdsian* literally means "sprinkle (i.e., consecrate) with blood". (*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed., 2000: 196b)

[30] Seventy-two is a Eurasian mystical number, not to be taken literally. (Mair 2005a: 70 – 72)

[31] Belief in a Tree of Life or Pillar of the World is widely distributed among many peoples in Eurasia and northeast Africa. (Holmberg 1922 – 23) In Chinese myth there is a tree in the far west called the Ruo 若木 whose foliage emits a reddish light that illuminates the earth. This is most likely a mythological explanation for the glow of sunset. Additionally, some scholars view the Ruo as a cosmic tree or the tree of life. See "The Classic of the Great Wildnerness: the North" in *Shanhai jing* 《山海经》 (The Classic of Mountains and Seas). (Birrell 1999: 188) The Ruo tree also occurs several times in the southern songs known as *Chu ci* 《楚辞》 [Elegies of Chu], namely "Li sao 《离骚》" (Encountering Sorrow), "Tian wen 《天问》" (Heavenly Questions), and "Jiu zhang 《九章》" (Nine Declarations). (Hawkes 1959: 28, 49, 78) The Ruo tree in the far west is matched by the Fusang 扶桑 tree, whence the sun rises, in the east.

[32] There are alternative, though less convincing, explanations for the name (e.g., "yew-column").

[33] Odin is said to have spent nine nights hanging from Yggdrasill in order to discover the secret runes. In Old Norse poetry (the Eddas), the gallows are sometimes described as "horse of the hanged."

[34] Maringer (1981: 191) mentions a similar find from Tågeborgshövden, Sweden.

[35] The Kuban River flows northwest from the Caucasus to the Black and Azov Seas.

[36] John of Plano Carpini, "History of the Mongols," in Christopher Dawson, *The Mongol Mission* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1955), pp. 12 – 13, as cited in Elliott (1999:51n61).

[37] Also spelled Tängri, this is the Turkic celestial deity still worshipped by many peoples in Central and Inner Asia.

[38] Cf. at note 11 above.

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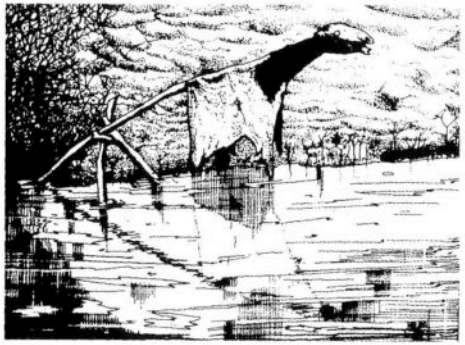
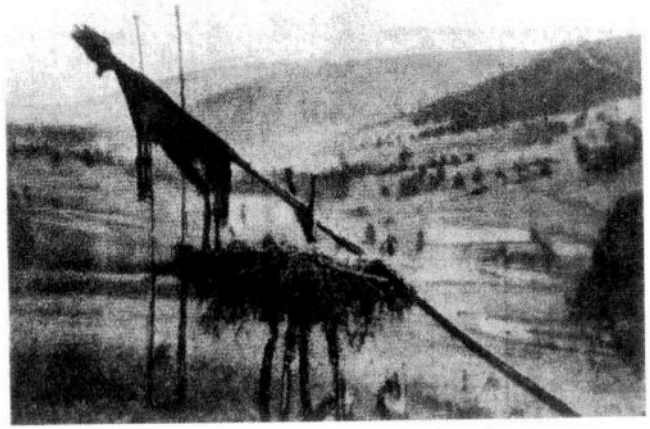


1. Reconstruction of a seventh-century (Iron Age) horse sacrifice over a sacred bog at Lejre, Denmark. Nigel Pennick. (Jones and Pennick 1995: 138, Plate 8.1)

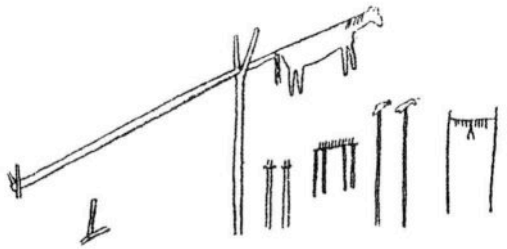
2. Reconstruction of a memorial service among the old Türks of the eastern Altai. (Ōsawa 2002: 200, Fig. 15; after V. D. Kubarev, *Drevnetiurkskie izvaniya Altaya* [Novosibirsk: 1984], 80).



3. Altaic sacrificial setup with stuffed horse pelt, including head and hooves. (Radloff 1968 [1893] II. 18, Tafel 1)



4. "Oirot" horse sacrifice. (Boyle 1963: 205) This often reproduced (but seldom accurately attributed) photograph is from an article by Kurt Lubinski entitled "Bei den Schamanen der Ursibirier der Kampf der Sowjetunion gegen den Medizinmann" in the *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* (November 25, 1928).



5. Drawing of a sacrificial scene on a shaman's magic drum from the Altai region. Aside from the horse pelt with head and hooves attached, there is also a rectangular offering table, two stakes with bird figures at the top, a cord with pendant objects, and so forth. (Harva 1938: 564 Abb. 107)