

The horse in Kazakh history

The horse played a colossal role in the formation of the Kazakh as a nation. Indeed, the horse played an even greater role in the history of Kazakhstan and the Kazakhs than the elephant in ancient India, sheep in early-medieval England and the camel for the Arabs.

The horse is surely the most wonderful, the wisest, most faithful and hard-working creature on the planet, and accompanying humans throughout their historical development.

Throughout history, people have used the horse as a means of transport, for food, haulage and military power, for sport, and as an item of worship and adoration. People saw horses as the fellow companions of celestial beings vested them with the divine power of inspiration and magical flight, simply deified them and even elected them to the senate. Besides mythology, horses have been depicted in literature with their own inner world. Finally, for many people of our continent, this four-legged friend has become a part of our common folklore, which sometimes has a precise way of relying the essence of comparison, although not always deserved.

However, before becoming a part of human mythology, the horse was destined to play a great role in the establishment of human society, its economy and in the economic development of the planet. We owe much to horse meat and horse milk in medicine and dietetics. Horse meat is considered to be the best meat product for asthmatics, while koumiss, fermented horse milk, is reputed to be an effective treatment for tuberculosis.

It is generally believed that humans tamed the horse in about the fourth century BCE, in the Eneolithic Period. However, modern science struggles to answer the question as to when and where humans really patted the withers and fed their new animal friend with fragrant straw for the first time. However, one thing is certain: this historical world event took place somewhere in the expanses of Eurasia and, most likely, in the steppes of Central Asia.

Horses had a decisive influence on three most important aspects of human activity: transport, agriculture and the military. For a considerable period of time the settled world managed without the development of horse breeding, until it had to face the superior force of the nomads, who relied almost entirely on the use of horses. The first historical encounter of the settled world with those on horseback took place in about 1700 BCE when tribes of Hyksos invaded Egypt from Asia Minor and conquered. The Hyksos, whose origin is still a mystery, brought horse breeding and harnessed transport to Egypt. The Hyksos disappeared, having dissolved among the Egyptians, while, from this moment on, and for the foreseeable future, the state on the Nile gained a military and technological advantage over its neighbors. With time, horse-breeding came to spread universally throughout the agricultural civilizations of western Asia and the entire Mediterranean.

However, every time the agricultural countries were forced to engage in battle with Central Asian nomads, they suffered defeat after defeat. The Mediterranean states relied on their naval fleets and the strength of their land forces, predominantly infantry. Moving deep into the continent they were beaten by incomparably mobile nomad forces. This is a fair appraisal, even in relation to those who had created the most advanced military machines of ancient times, the Greek Macedonians and the Romans.

Up to the fifth century the Europeans were able to hold back the onslaught of the nomadic people from the depths of Eurasia. However, in the fifth century, the people known as the Huns entered history and destroyed the Roman Empire, leaving an enduring reminder of the supremacy of mounted armies over foot armies. On the whole, the long and hard historical process known as the “Migration Period”, which touched the entire history of Eurasia, could only have taken place thanks to the people with their horses from the Great Steppe. From the first millennium of the Common Era the nomads of Central Eurasia enter history’s center stage, at the same time playing the role of creators of great empires and cultural-technological intermediaries between remote civilizations. From the

outset, the horse in this epoch is a military form of transport, the basis of military might and power, and a subject for barter and trade. Not surprisingly, the aristocracy of the settled agricultural people sought to acquire horses, which had become a symbol of a privileged status and military superiority.

The European feudal society saw the formation of a class of feudal horsemen, the cavalier, chevalier and the caballero, together with the heavy cavalry. The advent of the heavy horses is attributed to the Middle Ages. In time, knights disappeared, but this breed of horse remained, fulfilling heavy agricultural and industrial work until the twentieth century, when they were replaced by machines. The heavy knightly cavalry was fine in European conditions, where they were faced with poorly armed peasant infantry. However, coming up against a mounted opponent, which used the horse not as a sluggish, armored monster, but rather as a means to acquire a strategic advantage with speed and maneuverability, the European armies of knights, as was to be expected, suffered defeat. This first occurred during the crusades when the knights had to fight the fast-moving Arabian cavalry. Then followed the invasion of the Mongols, after which Eurasia found itself for several centuries in the grip of the nomads' total military supremacy.

However, in the new era, the settled civilizations acquired their own military and technological advantage over the nomads. This occurred not only thanks to the development of firearms, as it was customary to believe, but to great extent thanks to the development of horse-breeding and the creation of an effective cavalry. In this way the Spanish conquered the New World, while the Russian Empire made advances far into Central Asia.

Throughout the whole of the nineteenth century, priority in military might moved over to the possession of naval power and fire power, but the horse retained its strategic importance right up until the First World War, when, on the battlefields of Belgium and Flanders, finally lost its significance as a strategic military resource. The horse went into battle at the soldier's side for the last time during the Second World War in 1939: the Polish Horse Cavalry bravely yet

recklessly endeavored to stop the German tanks near Warsaw; the mistake was repeated in 1941 by Soviet Marshal Budenny. Finally, the Mongolian mounted forces took part in the destruction of the Japanese Kwantung Army in Manchuria in 1945.

With technological progress and the universal spread of machines, the number of horses in the world fell steadily. By 1930, there were about 120 million horses, while in 1970 there were just a little over 60 million. Today, there are fewer 40 million horses across the world. In the early twentieth century, Russia had the world's largest number of horses, with about 40 million grazing its fields, meadows and steppe lands. On the eve of collectivization in the USSR there were 32,6 million, after it there were 21,1 million. At the end of its existence, the Soviet Union had 7-8 million horses and this is with the USSR having the world's greatest potential for horse-herding.

In the mid-nineteenth century there were about 4 million horses in Kazakhstan, while from the moment the country joined with Russia, the number fell steadily, a result of both political and socio-economic reasons. In the second half of the nineteenth century a market mechanism came into play: the type of livestock reared by the Kazakhs was in response to heightened market demand for sheep's wool and lamb. The catastrophe that was the collectivization of 1931-1932 had at its heart a purely political motivation: the numbers of horses in Kazakhstan fell to a level never seen before, namely to about 300,000 head in all. The development of virgin lands, which required the requisition of an enormous amount of pasture, also put pay to a blossoming in horse-herding. After a dramatic change in the economic model in early 1900s, this number began to fall at catastrophic rates. At present, there are some 985,000 horses in Kazakhstan, although experts believe these figures are understated: as a result of privatization, a considerable part of the livestock was taken away from state control and accordingly from the statistics.

So, Kazakhstan, a great steppe state, the prosperity of which was ensured for thousands of years by its herds of horses, is now experiencing a dramatic period of

separation from its equine past. In order to revitalize the horse-breeding industry in Kazakhstan, faced with an ever-decreasing number of horses in the republic, perhaps it is time for a moratorium to be declared on their slaughter. The best response to this issue must come from Khan Kasym: “We are residents of the steppe; our possessions and goods are not rare and they are not valuable. But our greatest riches are our horses”.

Used material:

Chokan and Murat Laumulin, “The Kazakhs. Children of the steppes”