

100 MILES OF VALLEYS: The Horse in Ancient Luristan

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THE HORSE AND EARLY HUMANS

The horse entered the imagination of humankind epochs ago. The earliest known, surviving manifestation of our collective adoration of the horse took the shape of a two-inch long, one-inch high, carved mammoth ivory figurine, 35,000 years old, so named the “Vogelherd” horse for the cave in southern Germany where it was found.¹ Noted as having been touched on its beautifully arched neck and back repeatedly so as to display significant wear even given its age, this horse was perhaps an amulet or other apotropaic object, possibly linked to humankind’s first relationship to horses: as predator.² For, horsemeat was a staple among many Paleolithic societies. In order to hunt this swift mammal on foot and without the aid of metal tools, one first has to observe its habits, its preferences, its patterns, and there is considerable scholarship imparting to the horse a mythical, religious significance by early humans.³ No doubt some of the impetus of this worship is related to the necessity of the horse to humankind’s primordial diet, but must also be due to the observed beauty and freedom of spirit, both perhaps reasons it is the most frequently represented animal in 20,000 years of Paleolithic cave art.

Yet it was not until about 30,000 years later that we have evidence of more significant interactions with horses. Current scholarship is rampant with disagreement over the earliest evidence of horse domestication, which is generally agreed to have taken place by approximately 4000 BCE, and recent genetic research has identified the western steppes of Eurasia as the origin of its occurrence.⁴ Nearly 2,000 years later, the archaeological evidence of the Sintashta chariot burials of the south Ural steppe, where whole horse skeletons outfitted with harness tack were interred, indicate not only that horses were domesticated by this time, but that they probably had been for some time and held a venerated, cultural role.⁵

Without the benefit of modern communication tools, not to mention written language in most cultures, it is possible that the knowledge of horse riding and taming was repeatedly attained and lost many times in pre-history.⁶ It likely happened in many places simultaneously, as necessity and inspiration converged, probably among the cultures of the mountain and steppe peoples, “far from the eye of the historian.”⁷ The earliest direct evidence of riding does not appear until 2150 BCE, this time in Mesopotamia, in the form of an impression on a clay tablet from a Sumerian cylinder seal. Despite the difficulty in identifying the similar-looking equine species in ancient artistic representations, as the use of onagers, donkeys, and mules preceded the use of horses, it has been established that this seal impression illustrates a rider somewhat awkwardly astride a horse.⁸ It was not long before the horse was ubiquitous in the Near East and would soon revolutionize warfare, and thus, redefine the cultures that could harness its power.⁹

THE HORSE IN ANCIENT LURISTAN

The bronzesmiths of ancient, northwestern Iran undoubtedly had extensive knowledge, as well as a reverence, for their equine compatriots. The region was heralded for its horses as much as

its horse wares, and both may have been traded, or ceded or seized as tribute, to nearby Assyrian, Mesopotamian, and other neighboring states.¹⁰ The mountainous central Zagros is rich in natural resources, whereas nearby Mesopotamia is nearly void of them, and this ostensibly allowed the ancient Luristan inhabitants to develop their unique metallurgy practices, and perhaps cultivate wealth via trade with nearby wanting cultures.¹¹ Moreover, the topography of Luristan was well-suited to horse breeding, and ancient texts and reliefs make reference to a long history of superior horses from the region.¹² A well-known Luristan scholar and archaeologist recognized Tepe Giyan, one of the few, discovered settlement sites, to be situated on the famed “Nisaeen Plain,” which the ancient Greek writers proclaimed to be the source of the Persian kings’ best horses.¹³ Additionally, Assyrian rock reliefs indicate military forays into Luristan.¹⁴ Records of the early 9th century BCE Assyrian ruler Ashurnasirpal II describe his campaigns into the central Zagros, where he allegedly subdued the king who ruled over a series of valleys, exacting horses from him and other “frightened kings” of the region.¹⁵

Archaeological data supports accounts of a notable horse culture in the ancient Luristan region. Not long after the approximated occurrence of horse domestication on the Eurasian steppe, and contemporaneous with the earliest evidence of riding at the end of the 3rd millennium BCE, horse bones were found at two sites in Luristan: Godin Tepe and Tal-e Malyan.¹⁶ The latter site further holds the distinction of producing the earliest, unambiguous evidence for the use of the horse bit, by way of recognized “bit wear” on horse teeth extracted from the site, dated to 2000-1900 BCE.¹⁷ Although there are reports of alleged horse burials from several Luristan excavation accounts, only one, dated to the 8th to 7th centuries BCE, was properly documented at Tepe Baba Djan and included harness and bridle equipment along with the interred horse skeleton.¹⁸ The prominence of equestrianism is also demonstrated by the prevalence of horse trappings in human tombs at several Luristan sites, and at significant ancient settlements in close proximity, including Hasanlu, Dinka Tepe, Marlik and Tepe Siyalk.¹⁹ Horse tombs were also found at Hasanlu, Dinka Tepe, and Marlik, indicating a predominant veneration for equines in northwestern Iran.²⁰

The horsemen and riders of ancient Iran have further equestrian distinctions. On ancient Assyrian 9th century BCE reliefs, Ashurnasirpal’s enemies, presumably from the mountainous regions of the north and east, are depicted making the “Parthian shot.”²¹ In this mounted maneuver, the rider feigns retreat and then takes aim at his pursuing opponent while facing backward on his horse.²² Only a well-balanced rider with considerable experience and horse knowledge could execute such a strategy, indicating a long lineage of riding prior to the first millennium BCE in the Luristan region. Further, a cylinder seal dated to the 9th to 8th century BCE and found at Siyalk shows two mounted archers wearing pants, a sharp contrast to the age-old, Near East custom of men wearing robes and tunics.²³ The adoption of such a radical outfit indicates that not only was riding well established in the region, but it was also a frequent occupation important enough at this early date among the horsemen of northwestern Iran to have prompted the evolution of a specialized costume.²⁴

Although it is not known who the ancient Lurs were, it has been speculated that the ruling class of ancient Luristan was probably a small, “warrior aristocracy, distinguished, so often in history,

by the possession of a horse and the wherewithal to equip it and themselves for battle.”²⁵ Horses were clearly an important, if not the principal, aspect of the brief flourishing of the Luristan culture, as evidenced by the inclusion of a great many items of horse harness and accoutrements in the graves of their dead. The unparalleled bridle bits and harness fittings that have survived the centuries, remain to tell the tale of ancient Luristan, even if the culture that created them has been obscured by time.

¹ Wendy Williams, *The Horse: The Epic History of Our Noble Companions* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), 12.

² Ibid., 14.

³ Catherine Johns, *Horses: History, Myth, Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 12.

⁴ Vera Warmuth et al., “Reconstructing the Origin and Spread of Horse Domestication in the Eurasian Steppe” (*Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 109, no. 21, 2012): 8202-6.

⁵ Marsha Levine, “Domestication, Breed Diversification and Early History of the Horse,” *Havemeyer Equine Behavior Lab*, University of Pennsylvania, June 2002.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ David W. Anthony, “Bridling Horse Power: The Domestication of the Horse,” in *Horses Through Time*, ed. Sandra Olsen (Boulder, CO: Carnegie Museum of Natural History, 1996), 63.

⁸ Sandra Olsen and Cynthia Culbertson, *A Gift from the Desert: The Art, History, and Culture of the Arabian Horse*, (Lexington, KY: International Museum of the Horse, 2010), 27.

⁹ Anthony, “Bridling Horse Power,” 59-61.

¹⁰ Robert Drews, *Early Riders: The Beginnings of Mounted Warfare in Asia and Europe* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 78-79, 124-126.

¹¹ Paul Collins, *Mountains and Lowlands: Ancient Iran and Mesopotamia* (Oxford, England: Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford, 2016) 10, 30, 46, 89.

¹² Drews, *Early Riders*, 76-78

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Bruno Overlaet, “Luristan During the Iron Age,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Ancient Iran*, ed. D. T. Potts (New York: The Oxford University Press, 2013), 384.

¹⁵ Drews, *Early Riders*, 77-78.

¹⁶ Ibid, 89.

¹⁷ Anthony, “Bridling Horse Power,” 77.

¹⁸ Ernie Haerinck and Bruno Overlaet, *The Iron Age III Graveyard at War Kabud, Pusht-i Kuh, Luristan*, Luristan Excavation Documents, vol. V. (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2004), 54.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Drews, *Early Riders*, 76, 102

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 81, 131-134.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ P. R. S. Moorey, *Catalogue of the Ancient Persian Bronzes in the Ashmolean Museum* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 289-290.