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A FORM OF HORSE SACRIFICE AMONGST THE 13th- AND 14th-CENTURY MONGOLS

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The Mongols, at the time of their imperial greatness, were perhaps the last people in the northern hemisphere to lay their rulers to rest in what V. Gordon Childe¹ has called Royal Tombs, i.e. in burial chambers distinguished by their size, the richness and abundance of the grave goods and the presence not only of animal but also of human victims. Such tombs Childe regarded either as heralding the birth of a new civilization, as in Mesopotamia and China, or as marking that phase in the development of barbarian societies when they were suddenly irradiated from a much higher civilization.² He would probably have placed the Mongol burials (to which he does refer *en passant*) in the second of his two categories. One could equally well describe them as a late survival of a tradition which goes back to the great Scythian barrows on the Kuban in the 6th century B.C.³

Perhaps the clearest account of such a burial is given by the Persian historian Jūzjānī (1193–1260), which I quote in Raverty's translation:⁴

They buried him [i.e. Batu] in conformity with the Mughal custom; and among that people it is the usage, when one of them dies, to prepare a place under ground about the size of a chamber or hall, in largeness proportionate to the rank and degree of the accursed one who may have departed to hell. They furnish it with a throne and covering for the ground, and they place there vessels and numerous effects, together with his arms and weapons, and whatever may have been his own private property, and some of his wives and slaves, male or female, and the person he loved most above all others. When they have placed that accursed one upon the throne, they bury his most beloved along with him in that place. In the night-time the place is covered up, and horses are driven over it, in such a manner that not a trace of it remains.

¹ *Progress and Archaeology* (London, 1944), p. 92.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 95 and 96.

³ See Tamara Talbot Rice, *The Scythians* (London, 1957), pp. 92–106.

⁴ P. 1173.

I should like to draw especial attention to the last sentence. Pelliot in his *Notes on Marco Polo*, I⁵ adduces other evidence to show there were no “funerary mounds” over the Mongol Imperial tombs. Thus it is stated in the *Yüan shih*: “[For Imperial funerals,] when they reached the burial mound (*ling*), the earth removed to dig the pit was made into lumps which were disposed in [due] order. Once the coffin had been lowered [into the pit], [the pit] was filled and covered in the order [of the lumps]. If there was earth in excess, it was carried to other places far away.” Pelliot comments: “This description implies that there was no ‘mound’, and that the word *ling* is merely used in the text under the influence of the Imperial mounds (*ling*) of Chinese dynasties. The arrangement of the lumps put back in the same order in which they had been taken may refer to the clods of grass which were not to be damaged so that the ground should retain its original appearance after the funeral. This was important for preserving the secrecy of the tomb.” In confirmation of this detail Pelliot quotes Carpini’s account of the burial of certain Mongols of great rank: “They fill up the pit..., and place over it the grass as it was before, so that the place should be impossible to find afterwards.” Finally, from the *Hei-Ta shih-lüeh*, the account of a Chinese envoy who visited Mongolia probably in 1232, he quotes a passage which corresponds very closely to the statement of Jüzjānī: “The tombs ... of [the Mongols] have no mound; they are trodden over by horses so as to appear as the even [ordinary] ground.”⁶

Carpini⁷ distinguishes carefully between this, the Mongols’ “method of burying their chief men” and the form of burial accorded to “less important men”, the position of whose tombs, far from being kept secret, was actually rendered more conspicuous by the erection of one or more horse skins over the site. This practice is described in some detail not only by Carpini but by Vincent of Beauvais,⁸ Ricoldo da Montecroce,⁹

⁵ P. 333.

⁶ On the tomb of Genghis Khan see Pelliot, *op. cit.*, pp. 330–353. The tombs of Hüleü and Abaqa were situated on a hilltop on the island of Šāhī in Lake Urmia. See Rašid-ad-Dīn, ed. Alizade, pp. 94 and 164, Mustaufī, *The Geographical Part of the Nuzhat-al-Qulūb*, transl. Guy le Strange, p. 233. Aryun (d. 1291) was the last of the Mongol rulers of Persia to be accorded secret burial. His tomb, according to Mustaufī, *op. cit.*, p. 69, “was made in the mountain of Sujās, and according to Mongol custom, they concealed the place, making the whole mountain an inviolable Sanctuary (*Qurūgh*), so that people could not without difficulty pass that way. Arghun’s daughter, Ūljāy [Ūljei] Khātūn, however, made manifest her father’s grave, founding a Darvish-house and settling a community here.” So too the Čayatai ruler Baraq (1266–1271) was, on the instructions of Qaidu, buried on a “high mountain”. See Rašid-ad-Dīn, ed. Alizade, p. 138.

⁷ Christopher Dawson, *The Mongol Mission* (London, 1955), pp. 12–13.

Kirakos of Ganjak¹⁰ and Ibn-Baṭṭūṭa.¹¹ The procedure, as reconstructed from these various accounts, was 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. According to Ibn-Baṭṭūṭa four horses were thus impaled above the tomb of some Mongol chieftain (not, as he alleges, the contemporary Yüan Emperor¹²); and William of Rubruck¹³ records how he saw the skins of sixteen horses hung on long poles over the grave of a person recently dead. The context of this latter passage suggests that Rubruck is describing the tomb, not of a Mongol, but of a Coman or Qipčaq. In any case, it seems likely enough that the Mongols borrowed from their Qipčaq subjects a funerary custom which another traveller, Ibn-Faḍlān, had observed amongst the heathen Oyuz three centuries earlier.¹⁴

The purpose of this practice is somewhat obscure. The dead man is already provided in the grave itself with a mount or mounts for use in the Otherworld; the impaling of horses above the grave must have some other significance.¹⁵ In a recent article¹⁶ I suggested some possible connection with the use of the "scorn-pole" by the Vikings. In one of the two instances quoted a horse's head was raised on the pole in order to lay a curse on enemies by frightening the land-spirits; in the other a mare was cut open at the breastbone and set upon the pole, the object

⁸ Quoted by Rockhill, *The Journey of William of Rubruck to the Eastern Parts of the World* (London, 1900), p. 80, note 2.

⁹ Ed. Laurent, X, 8.

¹⁰ See Boyle, "Kirakos of Ganjak on the Mongols", *CAJ*, VIII/3 (September, 1963), pp. 199–214 (204–207 and note 33).

¹¹ *Ibn Baṭṭūṭa: Travels in Asia and Africa 1325–54*, transl. H. A. R. Gibb (London, 1929), pp. 299–300.

¹² This was Toγan-Temür (1332–1370), the last of the line. The Emperor was slain, according to Ibn-Baṭṭūṭa, *loc. cit.*, by his nephew, Fīrūz, who then transferred the capital from Pekin to Qara-Qorum. On this extraordinary passage Gibb comments, *op. cit.*, p. 373: "As this Fīrūz appears to be totally unknown, and as the seat of the Great Khāns was not removed to Qarāqorum until after the death of Togon Timur in 1371 (if the Chinese records are true), the existence of this passage in a book of which a copy written in 1356 is still extant is a problem better suited for investigation by the Psychic Society than by the matter-of-fact historian."

¹³ Ed. Rockhill, p. 82.

¹⁴ See below, p. 149.

¹⁵ This problem is touched upon by Jean-Paul Roux, *La Mort chez les peuples altaïques anciens et médiévaux d'après les documents écrits* (Paris, 1963), p. 174: "Il reste cependant encore à comprendre pourquoi certains animaux sont enterrés, pourquoi d'autres sont empalés. Sont-ils destinés à servir des âmes différentes? Seule, sans doute, une enquête ethnographique peut ici nous répondre."

¹⁶ See above, note 10.

being to insult a man who had not turned up for a duel. On the strength of this comparison I concluded that the purpose of erecting horse hides over graves was perhaps to protect the dead against attack by malignant spirits. However a passage in the Armenian historian Movsēs Dasxurancī (Kałankatuaci),¹⁷ to which I was able to refer in a postscript to my article, suggests a more likely explanation of the practice. *A propos* of the mission of the Armeno-Albanian bishop Israyēl in 681–2 to the Khazars (or vassals of the Khazars) in Northern Daghestan it is stated¹⁸ that this people used to sacrifice horses to oak-trees dedicated to Tengri, pouring the animals' blood over the trees and suspending their heads and skins from the branches. This is a ritual which survived into modern times amongst the forest peoples along the Volga. Strahlenberg, who as a Swedish prisoner of war passed thirteen years in various parts of the Russian Empire at the beginning of the 18th century, writes as follows of the Cheremiss¹⁹: "These People have no Idols of Wood; but direct their Prayers towards Heaven in the open Air, and near great Trees, to which they pay Honour, and hold their Assemblies round about them. The Hides and Bones of such Cattle as they sacrifice, they hang about these their holy Trees to rot, by Way of Sacrifice, to the Air." What Strahlenberg means by "Cattle" is made clear in his section on the Mordvins, of whom he says:²⁰ "They do not hang the Hides of Horses on trees, as the Scheremissi do..."²¹ Of the Chuvash, finally, he says:

¹⁷ *History of the Caucasian Albanians*, trans. C. J. F. Dowsett (London, 1961).

¹⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 99.

¹⁹ *An historico-geographical Description of the North and Eastern Parts of Europe and Asia ...* (London, 1738), pp. 354–355. The German original (Stockholm, 1730) was not accessible to me.

²⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 413.

²¹ They did in fact follow this practice at an earlier period. The Venetian Giosaphat Barbaro, who visited this region in the first half of the 15th century, has left an account of the "faith and maners" of the Moxii, i.e. the Moksha, a branch of the Mordvins. I reproduce the relevant passage from the Early Tudor translation by William Thomas, published by the Hakluyt Society in 1873: "At a certein tyme of the yere they vse to take a horse: which they laie alonge on the plaine. His iiij feete bounden to iiij stakes, and his heade to an other. This doon, cometh one with bowe and arrowes; and, standing a convenient distance of, shooteth towards the hert so often, till he haue killed him. And whan the horse is thus deade they flaye him and make a bottel of his hide, vsing with the fleshe certein ceremonies: which, neretheles, they eate at leingth. Than they stufe the hyde so full of strawe, that it seemeth hole again; and in every one of his legges putt a pece of woodde; and so sett him afoote again, as though he were on lyve. Finally, they go to a great tree and thereof cutt such a boowe as they thinke best, and thereof make a skaffolde wheron they sett this horse standing, and so worship him. Offering sables, armelynes, menyver, martrons and foxes, which they hange on the same tree, even as we offer up candells. By reason whereof the trees there are full of such fures."

“It is remarkable, that Horses are in such Esteem with them, that they make no other Use even of their Hides but to hang them up upon Trees.”²²

I would suggest that this is the older form of the practice, and that the steppe-dwellers in adapting it to their own environment suspended the victims from poles simply because of the absence or scarcity of trees. It follows that the horses impaled above the grave, as distinct from those buried in it, are intended as offerings to the Sky-God Tengri. This is confirmed by the circumstance that the sixteen horse skins raised over the grave described by Rubruck were so disposed that four of them were facing “each quarter of the world”, i.e. each of the four corners of the heavens.²³

The sacrifice of horses in this fashion has survived into recent times, notably among the Altaian Turks in the Sacrifice to Bai-Ülgen, i.e. Tengri, but apparently only on the occasion of public ceremonies.²⁴ The custom of raising horse skins upon poles over the graves of the dead was perhaps mainly or wholly confined to the Mongols of the Golden Horde, who stood in the closest contact with the Qipčaq. The practice was then gradually abandoned with their adoption of Islam.

Quite another explanation of this custom is offered by Ibn-Faḍlān in his account, already referred to, of the funerary rites of the Oğuz Turks. The following is a literal translation of the relevant passage:²⁵

When one of them dies they dig a great pit for him in the shape of a house. Then they go to him and put on his jacket,²⁶ belt and bow. In his hand they place a wooden cup containing wine and in front of him they leave a wooden vessel [likewise] containing wine. Everything that belonged to him they bring and place with him in that house. Then they seat him in it and roof over the house above him, setting a kind of clay dome over it. Then betaking themselves to his horses they kill a hundred, two hundred or [only] one of them according to their quantity. They eat the flesh of these except the head, legs, hide and tail, which they suspend²⁷ on wood. And they say: “These are the horses on

²² *Op. cit.*, p. 356.

²³ Presumably the four poles over the grave described by Ibn-Baṭṭūṭa were similarly orientated. However, only three horses were impaled over the tombs of the Emperor's chief relatives, and only one over each of the rest.

²⁴ See M. A. Czaplicka, *Aboriginal Siberia* (Oxford, 1914), pp. 298–299, Uno Harva, *Die religiösen Vorstellungen der altaischen Völker* (Helsinki, 1938), pp. 553–556 and 564, and Mircea Eliade, *Le Chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l'extase* (Paris, 1951), pp. 175–177.

²⁵ A. P. Kovalevsky, *Kniga Axmeda ibn-Fadlana o ego putešestvii na Volgu b 921–922 gg.* (Kharkov, 1956), text, p. 335, translation, p. 128. A. Z. V. Togan's edition and translation – *Ibn Faḍlāns Reisebericht* (Leipzig, 1939) – were not accessible to me.

²⁶ The editors read *قوله* for the unintelligible *قوله* of the text.

²⁷ In Kovalevsky's translation the hides are “stretched on wooden structures”. C. E. Bosworth, *The Ghaznavids* (Edinburgh, 1963), p. 217, describes the slaughtered

which he will ride to Paradise.” And if he had killed a man and had been brave they carve wooden images to the number of those that had been killed and place them on his grave, saying: “These are his slaves that will serve him in Paradise.” And sometimes they neglect to kill the horses for a day or two, and an old man, one of their elders,²⁸ will exhort them, saying: “I saw so-and-so (meaning the dead man) in my sleep and he said to me: ‘As you see, my companions have got ahead of me and my feet are sore²⁹ from following them. I cannot catch up with them and have been left all alone.’” Upon this they betake themselves to the horses, kill them and hang them up³⁰ alongside his tomb. And after a day or two that old man goes to them and says: “I saw so-and-so and he said: ‘Tell my family and my companions that I have caught up with those that got ahead of me and have rested from my weariness.’”

Among the Oğuz, then, if we accept the testimony of Ibn-Faḍlān, the purpose of impaling horses over a tomb was, quite unequivocally, to provide the dead man with the means of transport into the next world. It is to be noted, however, that Ibn-Faḍlān makes no mention of victims *inside* the grave. Perhaps the suspended hides were a substitute for such victims, just as the wooden effigies of dead enemies (apparently a kind of *balbal*³¹) were a substitute for human victims. One would expect a degenerate form of the ritual amongst the wretched, “almost irreligious”, nomads whom the Caliph’s envoy encountered wandering “like wild asses” on the Ust’ Urt Plateau.³² As we have seen, the suspension of horse hides as a sacrifice to the Sky-God is recorded in the Caucasus area at the end of the 7th century, amongst the Finnic and Turkic peoples along the Middle Volga down to the 18th century and amongst the Turks of the Altai region down almost to the present day. It is difficult to believe that this was not the original significance of the practice, and I would still suggest, despite the evidence of Ibn-Faḍlān, that the horse skins suspended on poles over Qipčaq and Mongol graves were also intended as offerings to Tengri. It was only the animals in the actual tomb that were intended to accompany their master into the Afterworld.

animals as being “thrown” on the tomb. However the most obvious meaning of the Arabic verb *صلب* is “to crucify”, i.e. in this context “to impale”.

²⁸ Togan, *op. cit.*, p. 27, sees in this old man a professional shaman. See Roux, *op. cit.*, p. 108, also Kovalevsky, *op. cit.*, p. 187, note 254.

²⁹ The text has *شفت رجلی* which Togan, *loc. cit.*, translates “... meine Füße waren zu schwach”. See Kovalevsky, *op. cit.*, p. 188, note 255. I have followed him in accepting Czeglédy’s *شفت* – from *شفت* “to be ulcerated (foot)” – as the most likely emendation of the difficult *شفت*.

³⁰ See above, note 27.

³¹ On the *balbal* or stone image of a fallen enemy see Barthold, *Histoire des Turcs d’Asie Centrale* (Paris, 1945), pp. 14–15, and now Roux, *op. cit.*, pp. 102–105.

³² See Bosworth, *op. cit.*, p. 216.