
Ancient Horse-Cultures of the Eurasian Steppes

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On the vast grassland steppes of Eurasia in the Early Iron Age, a new kind of culture emerged in which everything in life centered on one particular animal: the horse. Evidence suggests that if the incubating grasslands had not existed, these horse-cultures may never have developed. Steppe peoples embraced horsemanship with a skill above that of all other societies. Solid boundaries and enough space and grazing to support herds of horses that swelled into the thousands made this possible. These inhabitants also seeded a wide range of profound advances, skills, and beliefs that impacted peoples of both steppe and non-steppe lands in Europe, the Near East, and far eastern Asia. However, while physical and intangible evidence appear to support the hypothesis that some societies outside the steppes may have adopted enough traits to claim a horse-culture heritage, whether they fully developed into such a culture in a non-steppe environment remains open to conjecture.

Origins: Environment and Development

The Eurasian steppe stretches from Hungary in the west to Mongolia in the east, and in modern terms is an eco-region of the temperate grasslands, savannas, and shrublands biome. The steppe has linked Europe, the Middle East, Central Asia, China, and South Asia through economics, politics, and culture since antiquity. Originally bounded by forest steppe to the north (now removed due to agricultural development), the grasslands grow drier towards the south. The climate is arid and harsh, extremely cold in winter and hot in summer.

In the Pontic steppe, the region north of the Black Sea that covers about 994,000 square kilometers (384,000 sq. mi.), a large number of rivers and their tributaries empty into the sea. In antiquity, people needed to remain close to these freshwater sources in order to survive. Likewise, horses need water and in the wild graze about sixteen hours a day. Moistier than the steppes to the east, the Pontic steppe provided more water and better grazing for herds of tough, wiry wild horses. The Greek historian Herodotus, who wrote in the fifth century BC, noted that other animals, in particular donkeys and asses, could not withstand the cold winters but

horses had the hardiness to survive.¹

When these wild horses were first domesticated has not been determined. Estimates range anywhere from 4000 to 2500 BC. The process was long, slow, and uneven. Recent studies suggest multiple locations, but historians and archaeologists generally agree its earliest occurrence was on the Pontic steppe. Additional theories support Dereivka in the Ukraine, c.4000-3500 BC, as the initial time and place. Further, historian Philip Sidnell proposes domestication spread quickly, dispersed through “trade, theft or conquest.”² Genetic studies suggest all modern domestic horses descend from the first steppe herds.

Archaeologist Barry Cunliffe cites the middle of the third millennium BC as a period of “movement and interchange quite unlike anything that had gone before or was to come for another two millennia.”³ Evidence suggests domesticated horses first reached central and northern Europe by passing through what is now Kiev then moving west to Poland and Germany and on to Denmark and the valley of the Rhine River. Indications support that the Bell Beaker people, so named for the bell-shaped pottery they produced, diffused the animal all across central Europe during their active period, c.2700-2200 BC. From there, other peoples further dispersed them.⁴

Originally nomadic, hunter-gatherers on the steppes hunted horses for food. As people gradually tamed the wild horse, they shifted into sedentary agricultural and pastoral communities, continuing to use the animal as a source of meat but additionally for hauling and plowing. Though no definitive date has been established, people gradually began to ride, allowing them to move more freely, much farther, and to manage herds more easily. Additionally, on the steppes pastoralists eventually realized that the harsh, endless grasslands were far better suited to grazing than farming. Building on their horsemanship skills and expanding their herds, equine-based cultures developed in which virtually the entire population was mounted. They spread from Hungary to Mongolia.

Of course, not all pastoralists on the steppes embraced the nomadic horse-culture life. Moreover, archaeologist Timothy Taylor cautions that the horse-pastoralists of Eurasia who did adopt this lifestyle were only semi-nomadic. In spite of being highly mobile, they continued to depend on trade with adjacent peoples in the forest steppe and mountain areas. The pastoral elite, as he calls them, became tied to sedentary communities along rivers where they traded horses, milk products, and other livestock in return for metals and wood. They also gave these communities a form of military-like “protection.”⁵

The horse-pastoralists’ existence is marked by their circular burial mounds,

called kurgans. Along the Black Sea's north shore, the burials are known archaeologically as the Catacomb culture, characterized by bodies and grave goods placed in side-wall niches inside a narrow shaft that was filled in and covered with a barrow (mound of earth). These date to the first half of the second millennium BC. Farther east, centered on the middle of the Volga River, the Timber Grave people built cabin-like wood structures in pits that they covered with a barrow. The Timber Grave people eventually migrated westward into the area of the Catacomb culture.

Far to the east, in the first millennium BC, the Chinese warily watched pastoralists transform into mounted warriors who were expert bowmen. They knew this meant "swift, repeated raids on the rich Chinese farmlands by mounted barbarian nomads in search of food, women, and, above all, silk cloth."⁶ When bribery failed to keep the nomads at bay, the Chinese decided to adopt the same clothing, including trousers suitable for riding, learn horsemanship, and become archers. Successfully repelling the nomads for a time, the Chinese then began to build defenses that they later incorporated into the Great Wall.

Regarding a western expansion of the pastoralists, Cunliffe observes "the intrusion of nomadic horse-riding peoples coming from the Pontic steppe [settled] along the Lower Danube valley and on the Great Hungarian Plain within the Carpathian Basin."⁷ The steppe people who settled in the Carpathian Basin kept close ties with the east and continued to bring in large numbers of horses. In time, kurgans began to appear on the western end of the Pontic steppe. Small numbers of these graves also appeared along the Danube basin in what is now Romania. As a defensive reaction to this incursion, farming settlements began to be located on promontories and hilltops. Additionally, "On the eastern frontier of farming near Kiev . . . there were massive agglomerated villages of up to two hundred houses, grouped together for defense."⁸

The survival of Assyrian annals and the fifth-century accounts of Herodotus allowed horse-cultures to emerge into history with more definition instead of being a shadowy concept known only by grave goods. The first equestrian nomads known by the Greeks were the Cimmerians. Of Indo-European stock, they appear to have inhabited the steppe north of the Caucasus and the Black Sea in the eighth and seventh centuries BC. Though not confirmed, the Cimmerians may have descended from the Catacomb people. Not particularly strong, they were pushed out of their lands when other tribes invaded from the east around the beginning of the seventh century. They split, some fleeing south through the Caucasus where they took lands in Urartu (Armenia), Media, Caucasian Iberia, and Anatolia. Others fled to

southeastern Europe where they were absorbed into the Thracian culture. Possibly related, the Cimmerians and Thracians who blended together are sometimes called either Thraco-Cimmerians or the Vekerzug culture, the latter named for a cemetery in Hungary where some of their burials have been excavated.

Other steppe tribes included the Saka, who occupied the eastern steppes and the Tien Shan and Altai Mountains from about the eighth through the third centuries BC. The Massagetae were a sub-group of the Saka. Sauromatians came from the southern Urals of Russia along the Volga and Don rivers during the sixth and fifth centuries. The Sarmatians, a loose confederation of tribes, displaced or absorbed the Sauromatians beginning around the fourth century BC. This group rose and fell through three phases that lasted until about the fourth century AD. These tribes, as well as the Scythians who occupied the Pontic steppe from the seventh to third centuries, likely shared a common Indo-European ancestry.

Herodotus's account of the Scythians provides a more complete picture of a horse-culture. Evidence suggests they descended from the Timber Grave people and were the tribe that pushed out the Cimmerians.⁹ Taylor explains that the seasons bound the pastoralists' movements and that the steppe environment was "inelastic: pressure at any one point can result in the progressive displacement of population across the whole of the Eurasian steppe belt."¹⁰ In this matter, he refers to climate change and gives the example of the Mongolian steppe as a main pressure point. In the second half of the eighth century, drought drove Mongolian pastoralists towards the Chinese who repelled them back westward. The Mongolians then moved into what is now Kazakhstan, where they in turn pushed the Massagetae (Saka) on westward. If the Saka pushed out the Scythians, this example could have been the actual event that drove the Scythians to the Pontic steppe and expelled the Cimmerians.

Herodotus wrote that the Scythians, on occupying the Pontic region, evolved into three groups. One group settled into to a sedentary, agrarian lifestyle along the riverine basins; a second group remained pastoral and tied to the settlements; and the third, the Royal Scythians, grew into wealthy aristocratic elite warriors. Some or all of the sedentary people may have also been indigenous and Herodotus simply lumped them together with the Scythian agriculturalists. Almost entirely mobile, the Royal Scythians constantly rode across the vast steppe, driving herds of horses and other grazing animals on which they depended for food. They used horses or oxen to pull their wagons in which they either sheltered or carried tents. When they merged with or imposed hegemony over other Black Sea tribes, it

was at this point that their culture truly began to take shape.¹¹

Physical Evidence: Innovation and Impact

Scythian kurgans, which date from around 700 BC, have provided clues into the structure and lifestyle of horse-cultures. While much has been written about the beauty and richness of extensive gold treasures found in the burials, the Scythians' military skills and innovations related to horsemanship influenced neighboring societies the most, albeit in varying degrees. A thorough examination of this physical evidence reveals additional information on the development of steppe horse-cultures, the depth of impact they had on neighboring cultures, and whether those impacts brought those other societies closer to becoming equine-oriented as well.

Scythian weapons included composite reflex bows, armor-piercing arrowheads, iron spears, swords, daggers, battleaxes, and whips, plus armor for both warriors and horses. The recurved bow, made of wood, bone, and animal tendons laminated together with hide glue, was an adaptation to fighting in a hit-and-run guerilla style on horseback. Relatively short at about thirty-two inches, it was much easier to handle than longer bows when galloping at full speed, abruptly changing direction, and turning and twisting while astride. The bow's taut compression enabled the archer to shoot long distances, perhaps as much as 1700 feet according to inscriptions. Estimates suggest a skilled archer could fire off ten to twelve arrows per minute, equal to medieval archers. The *gorytos* was a case hung from the belt that held the bow and up to seventy-five arrows. Like the short bow, the case was probably developed to increase efficiency while riding in combat. Arrowheads were trilobate (three lobed) in design and were of "strict aerodynamic forms and superbly exact workmanship; the simplicity and perfection of the lines stands comparison with modern rockets."¹²

Burials and sculptural evidence indicate every Scythian had a bow and arrows, not only aristocrats and warriors but the average man, plus women and children as well, paralleling the notion that every Scythian also had a mount. While the *gorytos* was unique to the Scythians, the Scythian-style bow and its variations dominated in Europe and Asia until the first century BC. Like these weapons, the horse had become an integral component of the nomads' warfare. The animal was growing in importance in surrounding societies as well. But to what levels? How much influence came directly from the steppe warriors? How much developed

independently during this early stage?

Since the sixteenth century BC, the horse had been gradually becoming a factor in “successive armies”¹³ from Egypt to India. However, in places other than the steppes, horses were very expensive to keep. Poor or the lack of grazing prevented large herds from developing except in some areas of Thessaly, Thrace, Macedonia and parts of central Europe. An army would have had to cut hay and transport it as well as supplementary grain—very time consuming, expensive, and often unavailable. Off the steppes only the elite—aristocracy, nobility, warriors and priests—kept horses.

These factors stalled chances of not only cavalry emerging but of the general population becoming a riding people on the scale of the Scythians and other steppe inhabitants, even though some elements continued to evolve. Various forms of chariots—some the classic two-wheeled cart, others a clumsier four-wheeled vehicle more like a wagon—developed at irregular stages throughout the Near East and Europe. Signs of horse studs and manufacturing of weapons and armor grew along with kings’ armies, but the transition from horse-drawn chariots to ridden cavalry was slow and uneven. Early depictions of riders that date from the second millennium BC appear to show messengers, scouts, or fleeing charioteers rather than cavalry. Herodotus wrote of a 1600-mile Royal Post Road from Susa (western Iran) to Sardis (western Turkey), with 111 stations at fifteen-mile intervals. Herodotus thought the Persians had started postal services like this, but it was actually an Assyrian innovation. Estimates give a galloping courier one week to cover the distance.¹⁴

A few manuals on horse training survive. Most noteworthy is Kikkuli’s, dated to *c.*1345 BC. Kikkuli was a Mitannian horsemaster working for the Hittites. Fragments also remain from Assyrian, Egyptian, and Ugaritic (from the coast of what is now Syria) works on training and veterinary care, and an Indian military manual with sections on horse training. In relation to Greek veterinary skills, Xenophon wrote a horsemanship manual plus quite a bit of other material on horses.

Ninth century Assyrian carvings show what appears to be cavalry, but the figures may actually be the enemy they were fighting—likely the Urartu from the Caucasus who had contact with steppe people to the north. “An inscription of Menua of Urartu (810-785 BC) lists his forces for one expedition as 1600 chariots and 9174 cavalry.”¹⁵ The numbers may not be accurate but the ratio is telling of steppe cavalry influence. Sculpted reliefs show riders in pairs, one with a bow, one with a spear, and working together like chariot warriors, as opposed to known battle formations

from the steppes that used larger groups of cavalry. In a later battle dated 714 BC, the Assyrians defeated the Urartians instead, using cavalry and only one chariot. In this case, rough country rendered the war carts useless while the horses were much better suited to the terrain. Interestingly, depictions show the warriors sitting far back, nearly on their horses' rumps.

Body armor had already existed in the ancient Middle East since the mid-second millennium BC. Eighth century BC Assyrian riders are shown with some light body armor. The Scythians copied the design, experimenting and adapting it to their advantage, and creating several variations that suited their horse-archer style. Usually it was comprised of a short-sleeved, shirt-like leather corselet covered with bronze or iron scales. With the metal discs overlapping like fish scales, the armor was nearly impenetrable by sword or spear thrusts because the blade would have had to cut through three or four layers of metal. The Scythians covered their helmets, shields and clothing with scales as well, the sizes of which varied in order to aid freedom of movement. The Sarmatians continued to improve this kind of armor.

Herodotus noted the Massagetae used bronze chest armor on horses. Because the animals can easily overheat, early cavalry horses had no armor; however, some evidence indicates that thick felt aprons or leather "trappers" covered with metal scales were in use by the fifth century BC. Sidnell notes this sort of armor is an indication that training allowed the horses to overcome their innate sense to flee and to charge close in to the enemy during battle. At some point, the Persians adopted horse armor, which the Greeks then adopted from the Persians sometime in the fourth century BC. The Massagetae and Bactrians—related and allied steppe tribes—were using trappers with iron scales on their horses when they fought against Alexander the Great. Alexander's successor generals in the Hellenistic period adopted horse armor as well.

Probably the most significant innovation of the Scythians was the pre-runner of the saddle. As mentioned earlier, depictions of Assyrian warriors show them sitting almost on the animals' rumps. Subsequent images show riders on blankets or flexible skins and sitting in the forward position. The blanket eased chafing but it gave no structure for the rider's seat. In horse-cultures like the Scythians', of whom a large percentage of the population rode practically all day, every day, the rider would grow sore and fatigued. The horse's back and flanks would suffer as well. The first structured seat alleviated this. It consisted of two leather cushions attached in front and back to a wooden arch, the cushions resting over the horse's spine. Moreover, with armor increasing in weight, a more secure

seat would help with balance and ease pressure on the horse. Stirrups did not exist yet, so this proto-saddle had to perform well not only for mounted warriors but all Scythian riders. Oddly, in spite of the profound implications of this innovation, early forms of saddles spread and improved only very gradually.¹⁶

Another innovation the Scythians developed due to the increased weight of armor was improvement in breeding bigger, stronger horses to carry the load. Herodotus mentioned two breeds that originated in the steppes. Nisaeen (or Nesean or Nysaeen) horses supposedly came from “the great Nisaeen plain in Media, where horses of unusual size are bred.” The Nisaeen plain was supposedly five to six days’ march south of Ecbatana (Hamadan) in northwestern Iran, perhaps in what is known as the Vale of Borigerd. The alfalfa grown there was, and still is, known as “Median grass.” Estimates suggest the horses to have been about sixteen hands high and very muscular.

The second breed came from Bactria and Sogdiana (modern Afghanistan and parts of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) and seems to have been similar to Turcoman and Akhal-Teke horses of today. Around 15.2 hands, they were a bit less bulky than the Nisaeen horses. They had great stamina and their coats were chestnut, dun, or bay with a metallic sheen that was said to gleam like gold or copper in the sun. In recognition of this, Bactria’s capital, Balkh, earned the moniker “Bactra of the Golden Horses.” The area best known for this breed was the Ferghana Valley in far eastern Uzbekistan, well east of Scythian lands. The Chinese knew of these horses, calling them heavenly or celestial horses, and attempted to trade for some in the second century BC. When the expedition failed, the Chinese so coveted the highly prized animals that they took 3,000 by force—50,000 men died in the raid.¹⁸

Scythian royalty appears to have acquired some of these golden horses. Hundreds of preserved horses accompanied high-ranking warriors in kurgans. Excavations have revealed many of these animals were between 14.2 and 15.1 hands high, more muscular than the average animal of the time, red bay in color, and closely resembled the Akhal-Teke breed.

Few places outside the steppes could support great herds of horses. While the Greeks called the Thracians “horse-loving” and their lands “horse-breeding,”¹⁹ a reference to an area with enough range for larger herds, Thrace’s grasslands were still nowhere near on the scale of the nomads’ lands. Thessaly in northern Greece and Macedonia, both under Philip II of Macedon’s control in the mid-fourth century, also had a fair amount of grazing ground. (Thessaly is where Philip’s son, Alexander the Great, obtained his beloved black stallion Bucephalus.)²⁰ In his iron-fisted effort

to consolidate power, Philip paid a great amount of attention to building an invincible cavalry by bringing in new bloodlines to breed bigger, stronger, and more durable horses. He also studied military tactics in Greece and elsewhere in the years before he came to power. One tactic he copied was the “wedge” formation that the Scythians’ mounted archers had devised. With a narrow front point, the closely grouped horsemen were able to quickly and easily maneuver at speed and break through battle lines. Philip, and later Alexander, were the first to use it extensively and consistently as shock cavalry.

In 339 BC, pressured from the east by Sarmatians, the Scythian king Atheas attempted to take territory in the west from the Thracians. Instead, he came face to face with Philip, died in the ensuing battle, and his forces soundly defeated. Philip took 20,000 Scythian mares to swell his horse-breeding program. He also enslaved about 20,000 Scythians. These nomads, as well as others who migrated into the area as their society was slowly weakening and pushed westward by aggressors like the Sarmatians, mingled with the complex mixture of peoples already settled or moving through the Balkans during the late fourth and third centuries BC.

Migrations of Celtic tribes into southeastern Europe were an increasingly important element during this same period. Hungarian archaeozoologist Sándor Bökönyi notes, “At the end of the Early Iron Age the Scythians introduced masses of excellent eastern horses to the Carpathian Basin, whereas western horses came to the area with the Celts.”²¹ Bökönyi echoes both Philip’s seizure of the animals and Cuniffe’s observation mentioned earlier. Excavations of Scythian settlements in Hungary suggest “a people who kept horses and were not too stationary,” and in contrast, “the Celts in Hungary . . . show the animal-keeping of a stationary people.”²² The Celts appear to have taken to the bigger, huskier eastern horses and continued to develop the breed even further. “Such horses—with Scythian gear—were found in the graves of their western masters.”²³ That Celtic burials contained gear and horses implies the Celts of this region may have adopted a horse-culture mentality. But did they truly become a horse-culture? And what of the Thracians? The Macedonians? Or any of the surrounding peoples, such as the Assyrians or Greeks, who experienced the steppe nomads’ strong influence? Having examined the impacts of numerous horse-based innovations, can any one of these neighboring civilizations be said to have fully emerged as an equine-oriented people?

A horse-culture, as defined by its development discussed here, is one in which the general population of a people was essentially all mounted, not just the elite warrior class, even though the elite always had the best, most noticeable

animals; while in non-horse cultures, at best, only the aristocratic leadership and part of the military rode mounts. Effectively this definition would eliminate the Greeks and the Near East peoples. Nor did the Macedonians embrace a horse-culture lifestyle in spite of the large numbers of horses they captured and bred. For the most part these animals belonged to the military; the civilian populace was as sedentary as the Greeks. That leaves the Thracians and Celts as possible candidates. Both lived in regions that could support large herds of animals; both displayed characterizations that suggest they were developing into horse-cultures, but was that enough to truly fit the definition?

The Ethereal: Iconography and Mythology

How deeply and widespread the horse-culture was rooted in ancient Europe and Asia can be analyzed further through the less tangible elements of mythology and iconography, which may also corroborate material evidence that does not always provide complete answers. With religion and spirituality interwoven in everyday life, to examine the ways in which the people revered horses as gods and goddesses might reveal a fuller portrait of equine-based nomads.

With the diffusion of domesticated horses, images of the animals turned up in just about every early society. The people of the steppes in ancient times were originally animists—believers that anything natural, like animals, the earth, stars, wind, water, and so on, had a spirit. Further, in their free-roaming lifestyle, the nomads came into contact with many other theologies. This resulted in “a polytheistic brew of ancestor worship and animism, perhaps with a little Zoroastrianism thrown in for good measure,”²⁴ according to archaeologist Jeannine Davis-Kimball. Indeed, the iconography found in burials across the steppes includes thousands of metalwork images of animals in a style so prevalent and distinctive that it earned the designation, “Animal-Style.” Its eastern influence on western art, known as “orientalizing,” is apparent in varying degrees in European art, most clearly in Celtic and Thracian works.

A few of the preserved horses found in kurgan burials wore masks that appear to represent antlers. This created a sort of symbolic “hybrid” creature—part horse, part elk—that would have carried greater power than either animal by itself. Another example is Tamgaly in Kazakhstan, a cultic site for three thousand years. Inhabitants adorned the natural outcropping of slate that rises out of the dry plains with petroglyphs. In the Bronze Age, worshippers etched twenty-one sun gods into

the slate. Later, but before the first millennium BC, figures of horses were added, including ones with antlers similar to those preserved in burials. Judging from adjacent human figures in the scenes, the horses appear to be part of a fertility ritual.²⁵

Archaeologists are unsure if the horse figures in Kazakhstan were meant to be sacred to the sun god figures, but the concept ties in well with the ancient Thracian belief that the horse was either sacred to the sun god, was a sacrificial animal of the sun god, or that the sun itself was a horse. Thracian mythology and folklore are full of tales of horses, especially white ones. Homer wrote of a Thracian king, Rhesus, whose horses were sometimes described as whiter than snow and other times “whiter than the feathers of a river swan.”²⁶ Without his white coursers and their lavish trappings, Rhesus would have greatly lost status, not only in life but in the afterlife, which is why kings (and other nobles) were always buried with their abundant wealth and horses. The dowry of a daughter of another monarch, King Kotys, included two herds of white horses. A king’s guests were required to bring gifts, the highest honor being the white horse. This may have reflected a ritual that deified the king. The Greek historian Thucydides said that nothing could be accomplished in Thrace without giving gifts.

In Thrace, the white horse was also characteristic of the ideology of kingship, which traces the evolution of tribal chieftains into true kingship. As family, clan, and community grew less important and the aristocracy of the tribes grew powerful, the horse became an increasingly important attribute of political, economic, and military power. Ornamentation of the horse became progressively more elaborate and lavish along with the rise of power. Chieftains and nobles decorated their horses with all sorts of ornamental gold and silver plaques that were attached to brow bands, cheek straps, chest straps, and crest pieces.

One of the most iconic Thracian art objects was the classic rhyton, a kind of drinking horn made of gold or silver. On those dating from the fourth century BC, the front half of a galloping horse decorates the narrow lower end (called the protome); the long open-mouthed drinking vessel curves upward from it. Also, art and mythology were deeply intertwined. “The Hero,” a mysterious unnamed figure repeatedly found in Thracian inscriptions, reliefs, and other artwork, always appeared as a hunter on horseback. He seems to have been a universal god worshipped by all the Thracian tribes, each of which had its own private name for him. Additionally, the god Apollo was depicted as a horseman only in Thracian mythology, as seen on many votive tablets.

By the end of the fourth century BC, many Celts, often synonymously called Gauls (from the western European region from which great numbers migrated), were moving into and through southeastern Europe. Though not quite considered fully nomadic (and in spite of Bökönyi's comment on their stationary trend), the Celts were well known for their high degree of mobility and their keen sense of adopting anything they deemed beneficial. Because of the wide diffusion of domesticated horses by the Bell Beaker culture in the third millennium, Celts had probably mastered horsemanship from their earliest times.

Like the Scythians, the Celts were animists. A deep reverence for the horse had already permeated Celtic iconography and mythology. "The horse could represent many things: prestige and sovereignty, war and guardianship, prosperity and plenty," writes archaeologist Miranda Green. "Horses were important animals in Celtic society, reflective of prestige and esteemed for their beauty, speed, intelligence, and bravery in battle."²⁷

Epona was the Celtic goddess of horses. Her name derives from *epos*, a Gaulish word for horse. Based originally in Gaul, her cult spread from Britain to the Danube River delta on the Black Sea, reflecting the great distances the Celts traveled and settled. Epona was a peaceful, beneficent goddess and the protector of soldiers and their horses, a testament to the Gaulish aristocrats of Celtic society who were also their elite horsemen. When not protecting the military, she was recognized as a goddess of domestic prosperity and fertility. The latter could not exist without the former, so it appears that warfare, guardianship, fertility, and prosperity were closely linked. Excavations throughout the vast European territory of the Celts uncovered inscriptions as well as carved images of Epona with numerous types of symbols associated with her cult. Oddly, in spite of the heavy orientalization of Celtic art by Scythian and other eastern art, the horse was not one of the predominant icons transmitted to the Celts. Images of horses appear to have already been well established.

In 280 BC, the Celts subjugated the Thracians, and the social structure of the conglomeration of Balkan tribes became Celtic in nature. By the end of the second century, the Hero figure carried a sword instead of a spear, wore a long cloak, leggings, and a torc—characteristics of Celtic customs and art. Most importantly, he was still riding a horse.²⁸

As in many other ancient cultures, white horses were considered sacred in Celtic mythology and folklore as well. In the medieval Welsh tales of the Mabinogi, Rhiannon rides a white horse and may be a later incarnation of Epona. The Celts also

held red horses in high regard. They were associated with *Annwn*, the Celtic concept of the Otherworld. If seen in visions, three red-dressed riders on red horses represented harbingers of the Otherworld. In addition, red represented a solar image, reminiscent of the sun god symbols and fertility ritual scenes in the Tamgaly petroglyphs. Like the horse, “the sun was closely associated with rulership, war, and fertility.”²⁹

The Celts and Thracians appear to have come close to having adopted the horse-culture lifestyle and mentality, demonstrated not only by physical evidence but by how deeply entrenched the influence of the steppe horse-culture became in their art, spirituality, and mythology. The lands in which they lived contributed heavily towards the shift to an equine-oriented society as well. The Celts occupied great tracts of Europe, parts of which could be considered steppe-like. However, though they traveled widely, the Celts were more settled than true nomads. Their society consisted mainly of groups of warriors and their families who raided for plunder to gain wealth. When an area played out, the group moved on, resettled elsewhere, and began new raids. They built houses that were often clustered inside defensive structures—not the basic characteristics of horse-culture nomads.

The Thracians lived in the far western end of the Eurasian steppe and were closely related to both the Cimmerian and Scythian cultures they eventually absorbed, but they were hemmed in by mountainous geography and diluted by mixing with many other non-horse cultures. They never truly roamed outside their region and built settlements similar to the Celts. Though apparently closer to becoming a horse-culture than the Celts, especially in their earlier phases, the Thracians probably never quite achieved that status either.

The geographical feature of the Eurasian steppe greatly contributed to the creation of European and Asiatic nomadic equine-based cultures in antiquity. Eventually most disappeared through conquest, assimilation into non-horse cultures, or a return to sedentary ways. Some nomads continued to exist into later times, most notably the Huns and Genghis Khan’s Mongolians in the medieval period. A few small groups survive today, also in Mongolia and in Kazakhstan as well. With the horse as a common link, elements of these ancient cultures were passed on in varying degrees to their neighbors. However, only those who remained on the vast grassland stage can be truly identified as horse-cultures.

Moreover, if the Eurasian steppe had not existed, horse-cultures might never have arisen at all. They could have developed elsewhere, but in different times and different ways. Native-Americans embraced the horse-culture in the central

plains of North America, as did others in the South American pampas, but without the serendipitous introduction of the Spanish horse, neither New World region would have ever given rise to horse-cultures. Without the right combination of conditions—the boundless open grasslands with enough available fresh water, plus sturdy, tough horse breeds—horse-cultures cannot truly and fully develop, let alone thrive. However, in spite of the overall loss of the world’s equine nomads, their legacy lives on in the creation of the saddle and related innovations, their love of fine horses and horsemanship, and in the rich, distinctive and abundant iconography of their Animal-Style art.

Notes

1. Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. Aubrey de Selincourt (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), 249.
2. Philip Sidnell, *Warhorse: Cavalry in Ancient Warfare* (London: Continuum UK, 2006), 4.
3. Barry Cunliffe, “Celticization from the West: The Contribution of Archaeology,” in *Celtic from the West*, ed. Barry Cunliffe and John T. Koch (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2010), 30-31.
4. Ann Hyland, *The Horse in the Ancient World* (Phoenix Mill, Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 2003), 21.
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