

Exploration of the Horse Culture in Central Asian Archaeological Discoveries

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ABSTRACT

The horse, as one of humanity's most significant companion animals, has played an irreplaceable role across various domains—including social production, daily life, transportation, military affairs, and cultural beliefs. Central Asia, a crossroads of civilizations on the Eurasian continent, boasts a long-standing and rich horse culture characterized by distinctive regional features and profound cultural connotations. Focusing on archaeological discoveries from Central Asia, this paper systematically examines the origins, development, and dissemination of horse culture from the Neolithic Age to the Iron Age. It places particular emphasis on analyzing the archaeological significance of horse bones, horse gear, horse ornaments, and related artifacts from key sites such as the Botai Culture and the Pazyryk Culture. Research demonstrates that Central Asia was not only one of the earliest regions in the world to domesticate horses but also a major source from which horse culture spread to surrounding areas. Within Central Asian societies, horses served not only practical functions but were also imbued with rich symbolic meanings, becoming integral to the spiritual beliefs of nomadic civilizations. Against the backdrop of the ongoing Belt and Road Initiative, an in-depth exploration of the formation and evolution of Central Asian horse culture contributes to deepening mutual learning among civilizations between China and Central Asian nations, offering historical grounding and cultural ties for cross-cultural dialogue and regional cooperation.

Keywords: Horse culture, Central Asian archaeology, Civilizations, Nomadic civilization.

1. INTRODUCTION

The close relationship between horses and human society can be traced back to the early Eocene epoch, approximately 58 million years ago. [1] Through a long evolutionary process, horses gradually evolved from primitive forms into modern *Equus ferus caballus* and were successfully domesticated in the Central Asian region around 6000 years ago, becoming an important part of human production and life. [2] In the millennia following domestication, horses played crucial roles in transportation, warfare, agriculture, and rituals, gradually transcending their biological attributes to evolve into a symbolic system with profound cultural significance, known as "horse culture."

Central Asia, located at the heart of the Eurasian continent, serves as a vital bridge connecting Eastern and Western civilizations. Historically, this

region served as a hub of diverse cultural influences, emanating from the Yellow River-Yangtze River basins, the Indus Valley, Mesopotamia, and the Eastern Mediterranean, rendering it a quintessential zone for the convergence and synthesis of nomadic and agrarian civilizations. [3] In this context, the horse was not only the economic foundation for the survival of nomadic peoples but also a core vehicle for their cultural identity and spiritual beliefs. With the deepening promotion of the Belt and Road Initiative, exchanges between China and Central Asian countries in economic, trade, and cultural fields are becoming increasingly close. Systematic research on Central Asian history and culture, especially horse culture, holds significant academic value and practical importance.

This paper aims to explore the origin, development, and cultural connotations of horse culture in the Central Asian region by reviewing important archaeological discoveries, analyzing its

position and role in the history of civilizational interactions. It seeks to provide a new perspective for understanding the diversity and continuity of Central Asian regional culture and offer historical reference for promoting China-Central Asia mutual learning among civilizations.

2. HORSE DOMESTICATION AND THE ORIGINS OF HORSE CULTURE IN CENTRAL ASIA

Although horses have existed on Earth for tens of millions of years, their culturally significant history began with domestication. Archaeological research indicates that horses were domesticated after other animals such as dogs, cattle, and sheep. [4] Around 6000 years ago, signs of horse domestication appeared in Central Asia. In 2009, British archaeologists discovered the world's earliest known evidence of horse penning at the Botai culture site in northern Kazakhstan. This site yielded a large number of horse bones, fossilized horse teeth, horse gear, and pottery fragments used for storing mare's milk. Scientific analysis confirmed that around 5500 years ago, the Botai people had successfully domesticated wild horses and began breeding, milking, and even riding them. [5]

The discovery of the Botai culture not only significantly pushes back the history of horse domestication but also provides key evidence for understanding the origins of Central Asian nomadic civilizations. The domestication of horses not only changed human production and transportation methods but also profoundly influenced social organization structures and cultural forms. With the maturation and spread of horse domestication techniques, horses gradually became the core element of the nomadic economy, forming a horse culture system with distinct Central Asian characteristics.

3. THE DEVELOPMENT AND SPREAD OF CENTRAL ASIAN HORSE CULTURE FROM THE BRONZE TO IRON AGES

Entering the Bronze Age, horse culture in Central Asia presented a richer and more complex picture. In sites such as the Afanasievo Culture and Andronovo Culture in the Altai-Sayan region, as well as the Chawuhugoukou Culture and Subeixi Culture in Xinjiang, bone or bronze horse bits, cheekpieces, and other horse gear used for

controlling horses have been discovered. These findings indicate that horseback riding technology gradually became widespread in the Central Asian steppe regions and further spread to the Mongolian Plateau and Northern China.

It is noteworthy that the invention and use of horse gear are considered one of the important markers for the formation of nomadic civilizations. [6] With the maturation of riding and horse-driving techniques, the range of activities for nomadic peoples expanded significantly, social mobility increased, and cross-regional cultural exchanges became more frequent. In this process, the horse was not only a means of transport but also an indispensable partner in warfare, hunting, and rituals.

By the Iron Age, Central Asian horse culture reached its peak. Archaeological cultures represented by the Pazyryk Culture fully demonstrate the elevated status of the horse in social structure and spiritual beliefs. The Pazyryk Culture is distributed in the Altai Mountains region, spanning present-day China, Russia, Kazakhstan, and Mongolia. The custom of horse sacrifice in burials is common, often involving numerous horses. For example, Bashadar M2 contained 14 sacrificial horses, and Pazyryk M1 contained 10 sacrificial horses. [7] These horses were typically equipped with exquisite harnesses, mask-like frontlets, and decorated with antlers, bird and animal sculptures, etc., reflecting strong ritual and symbolic significance.

Furthermore, a golden headdress unearthed at the Issyk Kurgan site in Kazakhstan is adorned with a pattern of two connected horses, further suggesting that horses might have been regarded as divine creatures or totems in the contemporary belief system. [8] These archaeological artifacts not only reflect people's dependence on and worship of horses but also reveal an aspect of the cosmology and religious concepts of early Central Asian nomadic peoples.

4. REPRESENTATIONS OF HORSE CULTURE IN CENTRAL ASIAN ART AND ARTIFACTS

With historical development and the deepening of horse culture, the image of the horse gradually permeated various types of Central Asian artworks and everyday objects, becoming an important medium for expressing cultural identity and aesthetic taste. Archaeological excavations in the

Khorezm region have yielded numerous horse-related artifacts, such as the “double-horse head conjoined” sculpture from the Ami Rabad culture, coins bearing portraits of kings on horseback from Vazamar, and pottery jars painted with images of mounted warriors. [9] These items are not only exquisitely crafted and vividly composed but also reflect the important role of the horse in political authority and status symbols.

In Kosh-Tepa, Tajikistan, and Kyzyl-Kala, Uzbekistan, horse-headed rhyta (horn-shaped drinking vessels) and pottery painted with horse patterns have been discovered. Gold earrings from the 6th–5th centuries BCE, unearthed at Geoktepe in Turkmenistan, are shaped like horses, with harness details decorated with gold granules and featuring small bells, demonstrating high artistic and craftsmanship value. [10]

These archaeological discoveries indicate that horse culture permeated all levels of Central Asian society, from royal symbolism to daily life, from religious rituals to artistic creation. Horses played an indispensable role, not only supporting the operation of the nomadic economy but also sustaining the inheritance and development of ethnic culture.

5. MUTUAL LEARNING THROUGH CENTRAL ASIAN HORSE CULTURE

As the core area of the ancient Silk Road, Central Asia has long been a hub for East-West civilizational exchange. The horse and horse culture were important carriers in this process of exchange. From the horse domestication techniques of the Botai Culture, to the horse ornament art of the Pazyryk Culture, and the horse-shaped artifacts of the Khorezm region, Central Asian horse culture not only possesses local characteristics but also integrates elements from various surrounding cultures, demonstrating significant openness and inclusiveness.

Driven by the Belt and Road Initiative, cooperation between China and Central Asian countries has expanded from the economic field to the level of cultural and people-to-people exchanges. Systematic research on Central Asian horse culture not only helps in understanding the deep structure of Central Asian history and culture but also provides common topics and emotional bonds for cross-cultural dialogue between China and Central Asian countries. For example, the

northern grassland regions of China also possess a long tradition of horse breeding and horse culture accumulation, such as the Upper Xiajiadian Culture in Inner Mongolia and the Chawuhugoukou Culture in Xinjiang, which share many similarities and connections with Central Asian horse culture. Comparative research can further reveal the connections and interactions between these two regions in prehistoric times, providing academic support for building a “Silk Road Civilizational Community.”

6. CONCLUSION

As one of the world’s earliest regions for horse domestication, Central Asia’s horse culture possesses not only a long history but also rich cultural connotations and profound social influence. From the horse domestication evidence of the Botai Culture, to the horse sacrifice rituals of the Pazyryk Culture, and the various horse-shaped artworks of the Iron Age, archaeological discoveries clearly demonstrate the central position of the horse in Central Asian nomadic civilizations. The horse was not only a tool for transportation and warfare but also a symbol of faith, power, and art, permeating all aspects of social life.

From the perspective of the Belt and Road Initiative and mutual learning among civilizations, in-depth research on Central Asian horse culture holds not only academic significance but also important practical value. It helps enhance mutual understanding between China and Central Asian countries, tap into shared historical and cultural resources, and promote regional cultural cooperation and people-to-people bonds. In the future, with the emergence of more archaeological discoveries and the deepening of interdisciplinary research, the study of Central Asian horse culture will continue to provide historical wisdom and cultural impetus for building a community with a shared future for humanity.

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