

BOOK REVIEW

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Carol Ferret. Une civilisation du cheval

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En Asie intérieure, tout tourne autour du bétail et, parmi le bétail, le animal roi, c'est le cheval. Libre et soumis, monté, bête et attelé, battu, éreinté et sacrifié, trait, mangé et corroyé, conté et chanté, c'est le cheval tout entier qui est magnifié. (p.16)

[In *Inner Asia*, all revolves around the livestock and, amongst the livestock, the horse is king. Free and subjugated; used for riding, pack and traction; beaten, exhausted and sacrificed; milked, eaten and curried;^a celebrated in tales and songs: it is the horse in all its forms that is glorified.]

This volume presents a study of the significant and complex role of the horse in the cultures of Inner Asia.^b Ferret primarily focuses on Yakutia, but also includes in her study: Buryatia, Khakassia, and Tuva in Siberia, and Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan in Central Asia. This work derives from Ferret's doctoral research (entitled *Techniques iakoutes aux confins de la civilisation altaïque du cheval, Contribution à une anthropologie de l'action*), and is based on field research undertaken continuously from 1993 to 1997, then episodically until 2008. It takes a comparative approach to the study of the cultures, focussing on Yakutia, but drawing parallels with the other groups in her study area.

Ferret considers the *inputs* and *outputs* of Yakut horse husbandry. The former corresponds to the activities of horse production by man, and the latter to everything that is 'consumed' (p.30-31). She considers the relationship between the *inputs* and *outputs* of horse husbandry to be very unequal, with the horse giving enormously in body products and labour, for a minimum of care and maintenance (the Yakut horse lives far from people, in a semi-wild state, and there are no stables and little food provided). This volume deals with the various uses of the horse (i.e. consumption), and the breeding and training of the horses (production) is dealt with in a separate publication (Ferret 2010). *Une civilisation du cheval* consists of five main chapters, which are supported by a glossary of terms employed across the study region and a brief review of the panoply of ethnic groups discussed in the volume.

The Yakut horse itself is a remarkable animal, surviving through the harsh winters of Yakutia (the coldest recorded temperature is -70°C !). The characteristics and pedigree of this animal is the subject of Chapter 1. The exceptional adaptation of this animal to this environment is underlined through comparisons to crossbred horses [horses produced by crossbreeding Yakut horses with other races with the aim of improving certain qualities, whilst still retaining its resistance and rusticity (p.68)]. Ferret describes how Yakut opponents to crossbreeding believe that these hybrid animals are less able to deal with the cold, having a lower density of hair per unit area (p. 55 and 69). Indeed, recent experiments measuring body temperature fluctuations throughout the year have shown that purebred Yakut horses are better able to maintain a constant body temperature throughout the year than crossbred animals (Anufriev et al. 2009).

This chapter also discusses variations in herd compositions through time and space. Various cultural factors can be seen influencing the representation of species, such as the reduction in the use of the horse for transport through the twentieth century and food taboos: Russians are not horsemeat eaters, unlike the Yakut; whereas in Yakutia, pigs (introduced by the Russians) were for a long time looked down upon, and even now only constitute a minority of animals kept (p.42, 46). The role of the environment is evident in the distribution of domestic species in the countries of the study region - for example in Yakutia at the north-eastern limit of the study area, horses make up over one quarter of domestic herds and there is a notable absence of sheep, whereas at the south-western end of the study area, hot and dry Turkmenistan boasts over 50% sheep, and a negligible proportion of horses (p.41). Although discussed, the importance of the environment and the extent to which it influences animal husbandry is not ultimately given sufficient weight. In the conclusion to the book, Ferret considers general horse husbandry models for the cultures across the study area, within which she compares horse population numbers to those of the human inhabitants (p.308), but does not discuss the role of the environment in this identified pattern. It is of course possible to raise animals in environments outside of their 'comfort zones', but this requires greater investment by humans than for species better adapted to those environments (as seen in the contrast in *input* for Yakut cattle and horse described by Ferret), and it remains a fact that there are environmental, biological and behavioural factors which will affect animal populations and their suitability to different regions (e.g. Kerven et al. 1996,; Temple 1984).

The dietary uses of horse are presented in Chapter 2, the focus of which is predominantly on meat rather than milk. Most of Ferret's Yakut informants deemed the meat of foals to be of higher quality than that of adult horses, and Ferret describes a husbandry regime in which half of the new foals born each year are culled at around six months of age, at weaning. Those culled in this autumn slaughter are predominantly males, as these are not needed in large numbers for the reproductive needs of the herds. Ferret also argues that this system is logical in terms of the minimisation of production *input*, as it reduces the quantities of fodder needed to be collected for the following winter. Details of meat preparation, conservation and consumption are also given. Compared to meat, milk contributes less in quantity to the diet, but is of considerable social significance. Mares' milk is consumed exclusively in its fermented form, as the lightly alcoholic koumiss. Ferret describes the production, consumption and social significance of this drink.

Beyond the dietary use of horses, the Yakuts also exploit almost all parts of the horse. Chapter 3 deals with the non-dietary uses of body parts and products: skins, hair, bone, tendons, hooves, melanomas (melanomas, which develop under the tail, near to the anus, in elderly horses, are used in the production of black dyes), excretions and secretions. The latter two consist of: dung, urine, sweat, saliva, placenta, and bezoars (bezoars are accumulations of foreign material in the stomach of the horse, and are awarded magical powers; being principally used to modify/influence the weather). Ferret describes and illustrates the diverse products and uses for these body products, and their manner of fabrication, from sun glasses made from horse hair - the eyes are protected by a mesh of intertwined hairs (p.135) - to the use of the placenta as a cure for female sterility in southern Kazakhstan (p.152).

Chapter 4 deals with the work use of the horse, which is primarily as a pack, traction and riding animal. The full modern range of socioeconomic roles are elaborated by Ferret, from agricultural work to horse racing; as well as its use in the past, including, importantly, in warfare - a use which has, quite literally, contributed to shaping the course of human history. This chapter includes detailed descriptions of the accoutrements of horse use for transport (harnesses, saddles, vehicles and so on) all richly illustrated. The important role of the horse for transport can be seen in the units employed to measure distance that are calibrated in terms of the animals, such as the distance covered by a horse in a day. In describing the latter idea, Ferret neatly leads us into the last of the main chapters of the book. Chapter 5 deals with the cultural significance of the horse in terms of what the horse represents to society rather than those uses providing physical contributions (e.g. body products and work). Ferret discusses its roles as an index of wealth, a monetary unit, an animal of sacrifice, and an icon in art and craft production. Ferret describes in detail the practices of horse sacrifice and burial alongside deceased humans across Inner Asia, and the longevity of these practices - stretching back in time to the early first millennium BC. In these early Iron Age burial mounds we catch a glimpse of the great significance of the horse to the past peoples of Inner Asia, with the impressive kurgan at Arzhan, Tuva, containing some 160 sacrificed horses.

This is a major scholarly work and there is not enough space here to do justice to the range of material covered. *Une civilisation du cheval* is an exceedingly rich and finely detailed publication. It is well illustrated, essential for the nature of the study, which also makes the book a pleasure to read. The strength of this book lies in the detail provided by Ferret's long association and immersion in these cultures. Ferret has cast her net wide - covering a vast area of the Asian continent, with considerable variability in natural environments (steppe, desert, mountain, taiga, and tundra) - all of which is united by the clear importance with which the various cultures hold the horse. However, the importance and role of the horse is by no means uniform across this area, a point ably demonstrated by Ferret's comparative approach. In this book, Ferret has achieved a unique and intimate portrait of horse use in Inner Asia, and I very much look forward to reading the sister volume.

Endnotes

^aTo curry (*corroyer*), here, is used in the sense of preparing (tanned hides) for use.

^bFerret uses the term "Asie intérieure", to define her geographic study zone, which stretches from Turkmenistan to Yakutia (p.23).

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Competing interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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