

Horses, Mourning

Interspecies Embodiment, Belonging, and Bereavement in the Past and Present

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*When we are alive, you are my wings.
When we are dead, we have one grief.*

—LINES FROM AN ALTAIC EPIC POEM ON THE
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HUMANS AND HORSES.

SOME 2400 YEARS AGO, PEOPLE BELONGING TO THE IRON AGE PAZYRYK ARCHAEOLOGICAL culture gathered together to lay their dead to rest in burial mounds in the remote Inner Asian Altai Mountains. At these funerals, they sacrificed elaborately costumed riding horses and carefully buried them alongside the deceased (figure 1). While typical burials of this age present only metal and bone for analysis, here the graves subsequently froze in permafrost, preserving wood, leather, fabric, and often the entire bodies of the humans and horses. These unusual burials thus provide an excellent opportunity for exploring the particular connections between these people and horses.

My concern here is with the sacrifice of the horses and what meanings the Pazyryk might have attributed to both their killing and their loss. Initial interpretations of these issues viewed the horses as grave goods, objects of material culture no more or less relevant in the end than a clay pot or an iron cauldron.¹ I take a different, relational, approach, one that considers the intersocial connections between horses and humans from both sides of these relationships. To do this, I apply two distinct research frameworks. The first is ethnoethology, which explores the “interactive relational system that links humans and non-humans [granting] all living beings the status of relational beings, that is, agents interacting on the phenomenon of ‘culture’ that was hitherto reserved for human beings.”² Here I draw upon ethological studies of horses, and an inside autoethnographic strategy using my position within the context of those I shall term “working riders”—riders possessing the ability and knowledge to school horses to be ridden. I also apply an ethnozoarchaeological strategy, which rests upon similarities in dealings between humans and other animals in the past and present. Through these lenses and based upon artifactual fieldwork at the Russian Federation’s Hermitage Museum I address the following questions: What types of relationships

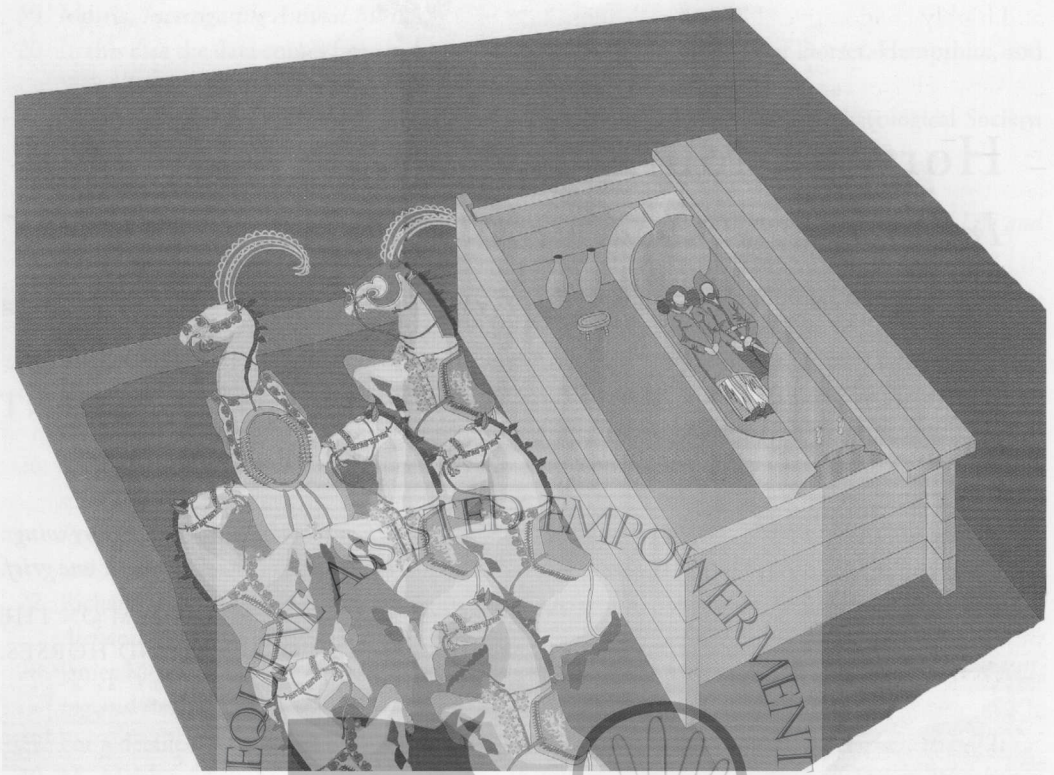


Figure 1. Pazyryk culture, Berel cemetery, kurgan 11, reconstructed, showing the variety of horse costumes and the placement of the buried horses within the burial mound. (After Z. Samashev, G. Bazarbaeva, G. Zhumabekova, and S. Sungatai, Beryl [Almaty, Kazakhstan: O.F. Beryl, 2000], 13.)

can develop between riders and horses, and how are they possible? What does the archaeological evidence imply about the horse-human interface within this particular community? And, how might these horse people have conceived of the act of sacrificing their horses, and their loss?

EMBODIMENT, BELONGING, AND INTERSPECIES INTERSOCIALITY

I begin with the continuities shared by humans and horses from a biosocial perspective. Humans are hardwired to seek connections with others. Because living in relational networks is more advantageous than tackling life alone, “the human brain is designed to assume that it is embedded within a relatively predictable social network characterized by familiarity, joint attention, shared goals, and interdependence.”³ Belonging within social networks is our human default, and it is telling that we term one of our most destructive psychological maladies antisocial personality disorder.

Like humans, horses are social animals—evolved to belong. In the wild, they exist embedded within communities of families, friends, bands, and herds. They live in bands consisting of a stallion, several mares, and their offspring, within which they are gregarious

and highly cooperative. They form intense bonds and have “preferred partners” with whom they spend extra time, follow, and cogroom, and these best friends can be members of other species.⁴ Horses are not only capable of such motives; as social beings they, like humans, *require* these needs to be met in order to be psychologically healthy. These similarities in ways of social being mean that humans and horses can understand a bit about each other, and the needs for belonging can be met by members of one species for the other.

This sense of mutual belonging is manifestly heightened through the embodied act of riding. Riding can be understood experientially not only as a tangible, shared space, “a spatiality of position,” but also as “a spatiality of situation.”⁵ Riding takes place in the zone of intimate space that is reserved in both species for friends and lovers. For both comfort and safety, horse and rider must move together as one, in rhythm and synchrony, and horses can actively participate in this.⁶ This funds recursive interrelatedness and care because from an evolutionary perspective such physical synchronization “is precisely where empathy and sympathy start.”⁷ Through riding both beings entrain to one another, fostering feelings of connection, boundary loss, and joined identity.⁸ This strengthens the human-horse bond and creates a mutually apprehended and cocreated lifeworld. Within this situational space, horses can come to adopt a “protective, possessive attitude toward the rider” that motivates them to “think well and bravely”—they will disadvantage themselves to help their riders. Riders and well-treated horses take care of one another.

Despret has noted, “What makes us ‘one of us’ for beings of one species will, like a proposition, overlap with what will become ‘one of us’ for beings of another species.”¹⁰ Horses, like humans, recognize other horses and humans as individuals.¹¹ Today where multiple horses and riders live or work together all will know one other as distinct beings. All will know generic things about each other’s species and will come through time to understand others as individuals with strengths and weaknesses, likes and dislikes, moods and peccadillos. All will experience an intersubjective, interspecies community, enmeshed through shared needs for belonging and embodied experience. Although certainly humans and horses have changed over time, might something similar have been present in Pazyryk lives?

THE PAZYRYK BURIALS

The Pazyryk-era (ca. 600 to 300 BCE) burial monuments dot numerous high mountain plateaus where present-day Siberia, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, and China touch. In these raised, stone-covered mounds lie between one and twenty-two riding horses, sacrificed and buried with their gear and elaborate costumes (figure 2). Of concern within these incredibly rich and fascinating burials are three aspects of burial patterning that inform the nature of these human-horse connections.

First, the Eurasian Bronze Age (ca. 2500 to 700 BCE), which saw herding economies emerge, transitions to the Iron Age (800 BCE to 100 CE) with several key features, all driven by the horse. These sociocultural changes include the completion of the nascent shift from pastoral-agricultural economies to fully nomadic pastoralism and a refinement of horse-riding technology. In the Altai Mountains this transitional period saw intense experimentation in producing bits and bridles, with considerable thought and effort spent finding functional designs. This is evidenced by the extreme variability—no less than thirty-seven variants—of

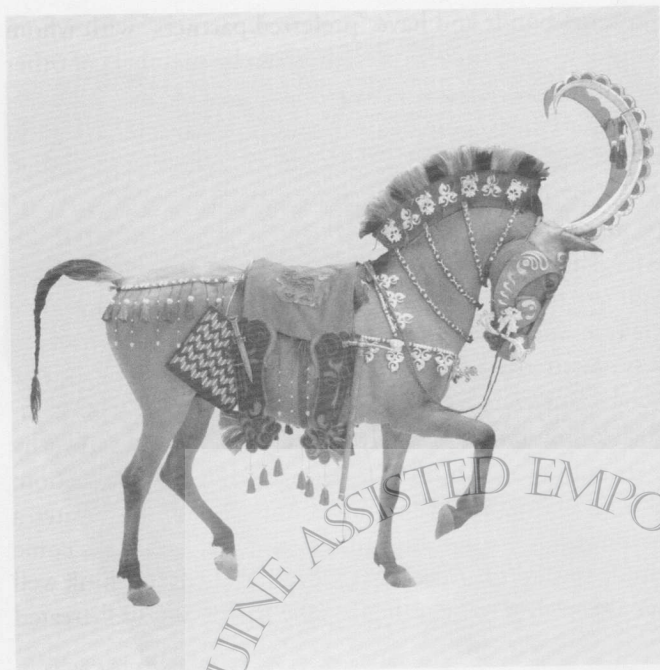


Figure 2. Reconstruction of a Pazyryk horse's outfit from kurgan 11, Berel cemetery, Kazakhstan. (After Chang and Guroff, *Of Gold and Grass*, vi.)

bits found from this period.¹² These jointed bits are similar in all regards to snaffle bits used today. Although any bit can be used harshly, snaffles are understood today as one of the mildest bits, used not to inflict pain but as communication devices.¹³ Apparently Altai bridle-makers were astute observers of equine biomechanics and behavior and were seeking designs that fostered rapport rather than domination. By the seventh century BCE, Altai bit-makers had fixed upon one style, implying this goal was satisfactorily achieved (figure 3).

Second, the period leading into the Pazyryk era also saw a significant shift in burial style. While during the Bronze Age parts of horse bodies and/or horse equipment had been buried *near* humans, by the Pazyryk era we see entire horses brought *into* the human graves. Bringing the horses into the burial mounds can be seen to accompany an increased perception of the importance of the horse and of human-horse bonds. The horses were now woven into and through this human society in ways that no animal had been before, and this is reflected materially—they were brought *closer*, in death as in life.

Third, although the horses were killed by blows with a battle-ax to the midforehead, I saw no presacrifice injuries on the Pazyryk horse bodies I examined (figure 4). All were well groomed, with clipped manes and tails. This holds significance because

[mutual] grooming has become an end in itself, a gesture of “belonging” and a symbol of the bond between the equine companions. Because of this, the grooming of horses by their human owners has a viral significance. In the horse’s mind, [it is] an indication that its human companion is a close friend.¹⁴

The physical contact in grooming acts upon humans in a similar fashion. The “affectional interaction” in grooming is pleasurable and stress reducing, decreasing heart rates for horses *and* humans, promoting a “deep rapport, intimacy, and mutual understanding” between the two.¹⁵ The horse costumes were well used and mended, indicating that such bidirectional

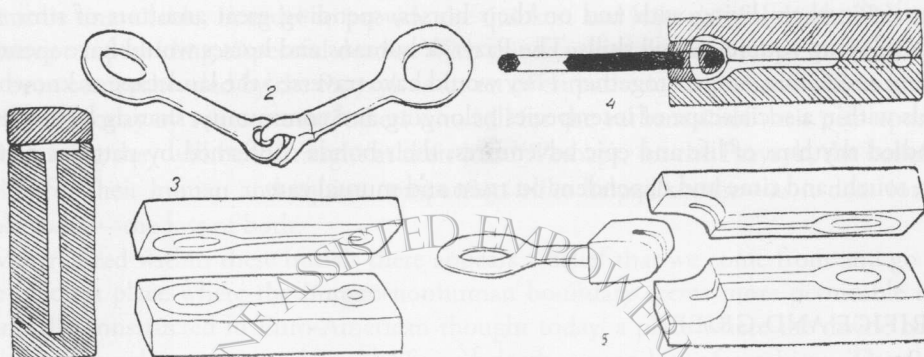


Figure 3. Pazyryk bit-casting process. (After Gryaznov, *Pervyi Pazyrykskii Kurgan*, fig. 18.)



Figure 4. Pazyryk horse showing the position of the lethal battle-ax wounds.

affection-inducing grooming was commonplace. Current ethological studies show that positive interactions with humans lead to lasting positive memories in horses,¹⁶ and it is likely the Pazyryks knew this as well. As with the attention spent developing mild bits, these people apparently listened to what their horses told them. Here it seems the horses, at least to some degree, taught the Pazyryk people how they wished to be treated—gently and with kindness.

These archaeological details show that within this interspecies community horses were valued subjects and that relationships of mutual emotional closeness and cooperation were wanted, developed, and nurtured. The Pazyryk people subsisted through hunting, fishing, foraging, and herding, and they appear to have utilized horsepower to the fullest in these endeavors. We can envision them living with and on their horses, spending great amounts of time riding and developing equine-related skills. The Pazyryk humans and horses would have spent years working and facing dangers together. They would have traversed the landscape as known individuals within a socialscape of interspecies belonging and community, sharing both everyday embodied rhythms of life and epic adventures, their bonds confirmed by patterns of movement, touch, and time and dependent on trust and mutual care.

SACRIFICE AND GRIEF

Then why kill them? It is unlikely they were sacrificed because they were expendable—quite the opposite it seems. They were invaluable in death as in life. Jacobson notes of these burials, “in all cases it is apparent that the animals were understood to be in some manner essential either to the passage of the dead person’s soul to the next realm or to that person’s life when he arrived there.”¹⁷ But might there be more to it than this? Might also aspects of the tight interspecies relationships I have presented—and the social characteristics of both species allowing and underlying them—have contributed to the reasons for the sacrifices and the feelings engendered by the act?

Horses, through time, have been regarded as sensitive and responsive to the deaths of their people. Caesar’s horse is said to have “shed tears for two days before the hero’s death,”¹⁸ and Patroclus’s horses’ sorrow upon his death was noted by Homer in the *Iliad*: “Therefore, these two horses stand here and grieve, and their manes are swept along the ground as they stand with hearts full of sorrow. They both refuse to move, saddled down with grief.”¹⁹ Recent neuroscientific studies show these narratives might not merely represent anthropomorphized hyperbole. We now know that the anatomical and chemical brain mechanisms that reflect separation distress for social mammals and birds are analogous to those that mediate the type of sadness that arises from social loss—grief—in humans.²⁰ When important social bonds are broken, many horses exhibit “classical signs of clinical depression” and can fall into an “exaggerated depth of depression [that] can present with physical problems.”²¹ Bereavement in horses is now treated in the same ways as for grieving humans, with antianxiety (e.g., Valium) and antidepressant (e.g., Prozac) drugs.²² Horses grieve, although today many negate the magnitude of these feelings through depersonalizing language, qualitatively differentiating human grief from animal “separation distress,”²³ or demeaning it as speculative through the use of scare quotes, that is, horse “grief.”

Certainly, as anyone living with horses has, the Pazyryk witnessed their horses’ bereavement following the loss of a foal or a cobonded horse or a human friend.

If the Pazyryk people considered that horses mourned the loss of human and horse friends it is unlikely they viewed horse grief as distinct from human grief, as is common today, but rather understood it as a state shared among all within the close ties of this interspecies community. From this perspective, the reasons for the sacrifice of horses could have included not only the need for their services on the way to or in the otherworld, but also a belief that the emotional weight of the bidirectional bonds of loyalty between rider and horse were indissoluble, unrepeatable, and untransferable to others and should be maintained in death as in life. It is notable that although the horses were violently killed, the battle-ax blows fell at precisely just the point where today we are told to shoot an injured or dying horse should other options be unavailable, in order to provide the quickest and least painful death. This implies an attempt at providing respectful deaths. With this in mind, the sacrifice of the horses might have been comprehended by the Pazyryk as an act of empathetic kindness, much in tune with beliefs held today by some pet caretakers who call for the euthanasia of their pets upon their death, fearing they will be distraught at their loss.²⁴ Perhaps, for the Pazyryk, the belief in an afterlife for their human and equine compatriots alike helped soothe—as it does for many people today—the loss of both.

Materialized within these burials there appears a belief that we come from and go to the same place, a place where the human-nonhuman boundary seems more permeable than it is generally constructed in Euro-American thought today, a place where the divide between human and nonhuman animals, and life and death, seems less of a schism. The Pazyryk appear to have valorized not human-horse differences, but rather “those traits we obviously share with other lives—we are finite, interdependent, embodied, capable of pleasure and pain, vulnerable, born to, and one day will, die.”²⁵ To tie this back to notions of embodied interspecies intersociality, for Stanesco,

Vulnerability is the basis of sociality, the basis of community. If we were immortal and capable of being entirely sustainable individuals, there would be no need for society or culture. It is our very ability to be wounded, our very dependency, that brings us together. Mourning is a testament to such a shared embodiment, which is the source of its paradoxical productivity. It can bring us together in monuments, in rituals, in shared stories and memories, and sometimes in collective action.²⁶

As close as these humans and horses were, members of both species would have grieved the loss of both human and horse individuals. In their placing of the bodies within the burial monuments, we can envision a ritual honoring both deceased humans and horses. We can imagine the Pazyryk sitting around their campfires, as today horse people sit around kitchen tables, sharing stories and memories of those who were gone. These narratives of belonging honored the brave actions not only of their deceased human comrades, but also of the horses who belonged with these people, because the two functioned together and cannot be untangled. The people around the fires recall the horses and people who took care of each other, horses and people alike who thought well and bravely. They speak of these horses' heart, loyalty, and courage; they call their actions honorable and perhaps even divine, and they do so without putting metaphorical scare quotes around the words. They do so because they comprehend that we are cut from the same fabric, we and these horses. And in that shared generosity—in the midst of the monumental messiness of daily life and in spite of bloody endings—there is indeed honor, and perhaps a type of divinity as well.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Certainly justifications for sacrifice can be seen to be culturally determined. Yet in this case study I have argued that horses' abilities and behaviors played a crucial role in how they were conceptualized and treated, as evidenced archaeologically. If this is so, then some Pazyryk meanings about horses seem not entirely arbitrary, not entirely culturally constructed, but rather based in part upon iconic, inherent characteristics of horses. I may be wrong, but I suspect that statements such as these might be off-putting to my colleagues who focus solely on the human aspects of human-nonhuman junctures, and consider our relations with animals entirely culturally constructed (by humans). But this need not be the case. Perhaps I might be forgiven for what we might term critical essentializing if we can agree that evolutionary explanations of facilitating mechanisms (e.g. shared social needs that may be fundamentally evolutionarily based) exist, but are mediated within the social, historical, and ecological contexts of worlds shared between species. Correspondingly, the ethnozoarchaeological project rests on similarities in dealings between humans and other animals in the past and present, while at the same time acknowledging the multitude of ways these connections could have been structured.

Were I concerned with foregrounding the negative aspects of unequal power relations imposed upon horses when humans approach them with domination in mind, I might have focused upon these sacrifices as indicative of the subjugated nature of these horses. Certainly this could be argued. However, because this is not the only way humans and horses come together, I have intentionally avoided this well-trodden theme used by scholars of the human-horse intersection.²⁷ In highlighting horses' natural history and biosocial characteristics, my concern has been with the pro-social commonalities shared by both species as social animals with social needs—family, belonging, community, affection, loyalty, and grief. These aspects would be missed in narrow, anthropocentric analyses framed solely within human domination/equine submission. In acknowledging equine agency, the relational approach enlightens how smaller-scale interspecies connections can be seen to fund larger-scale social structures.

Finally, considering interpretations of interspecies relationships as materialized in the archaeologically visible past allows us to step outside of current Euro-American paradigms. This can reflect back on our understandings of human-nonhuman intersections today, broadening our views of the potentialities of these relationships in the present. Tacking back and forth between the past and present, humans and horses, and the biological and cultural, here both have informed, and been informed by, the bidirectional nature of human-horse relationships—and by horses' mourning.

NOTES

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