IMAGES OF THE HORSE AND HORSEMAN IN CORDED WARE CULTURE STUDIES

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Abstract

This article presents an overview of the representations of the horse and horseman in Corded Ware Culture studies. A survey of the literature is proposed, discussing assumptions of the role of the horse in the communities of this culture.

Key words: Corded Ware Culture, mobility, horse, horseman, East Baltic.

Introduction

The visibility threshold always is a challenge in archaeological research, especially when one talks about groups of people who are used to being described as mobile or nomadic. Since pastoral nomads are so ephemeral and enigmatic, they always fascinate archaeologists, but their representation often tends to be oversimplified. While the Late Neolithic Corded Ware Culture generally has been identified with mobile groups of people within its rich history of research, it still remains quite a mysterious phenomenon. Despite various opinions about Corded Ware Culture communities, the majority of researchers have long agreed upon a particular model of subsistence for the Corded Ware Culture people: the basis of their economy was pastoral stock-breeding. The determination of Corded Ware Culture bearers as warlike groups who moved over long distances has provoked speculations regarding their mode of transport. Naturally, questions concerning the role of the domesticated horse have arisen. The aim of this paper is to analyse the spectrum of viewpoints that deal with the horse and horseman in this culture.

Mobility and warfare

Migration based explanations of Corded Ware Culture bearers with an emphasized role of the horse as a riding animal primarily originated in the works of Gustaff Kossinna (Kossinna 1902) and Gordon Childe (Childe 1926). The widely accepted "Kurgan theory" put forth by Marija Gimbutas (Gimbutas 1980, pp.273-317) defined communities of the Corded Ware Culture as extremely mobile groups of horse riders and cattle breeders. According to this well-known construct, which was more or less adopted by other researchers (Kruk 1980; Mallory 1991; Anthony 2007 and others; for an alternative approach based on the theory of autochthonous development see Malmer 1962 and Kristiansen 1989), the fast and extensive spread of Corded Ware Culture bearers could be explained by the nomadic and warlike nature of the community, where the mounted warrior played the essential role. This concept dominated for many decades and served to form an image of the Corded Ware Culture man as a warlike rider on horseback (Fig. 1). Other assumptions made were that boat-shaped battle axes – the characteristic artefact of the Corded Ware Culture – were weapons used only by the riders, as these axes were not suitable for unmounted struggles (Rimantienė 1989, p.54), and that broken battle axes found in settlements pointed to the not always peaceful character of the infiltration of the newcomers (Loze 1996, p.67).

In the East Baltic region, similar ideas concerning the mode of economy of the people were elaborated. East Baltic Corded Ware Culture people were regarded not only as "at least mobile" (Kriiska 2000, p.74), or as pastoralists (Loze 1996, p.70; Rimantienė 1996, p.221; Brazaitis 2005, p.237), but also as some kind of warlike prospectors or individual traders, who provided the so-called local communities with cattle, grain, or some kind of raw material (Girininkas 2002, p.87; 2005, p.174). It must be noted, however, that the concept of the East Baltic Corded Ware Culture bearers as mobile communities was based more on the absence of data rather than the evidence. The essential implication concerns the lack of one thing or other: of settlements with a thick cultural layer, of buildings, or of big cemeteries – i.e., of any feature which could allude to permanent settlement. The invisibility of these features provokes the perplexing question regarding the mission and activity of the Corded Ware Culture people, whosoever they might have been.

Along with the relatively recent growing criticism regarding the concept of global migrations (e.g. Härke

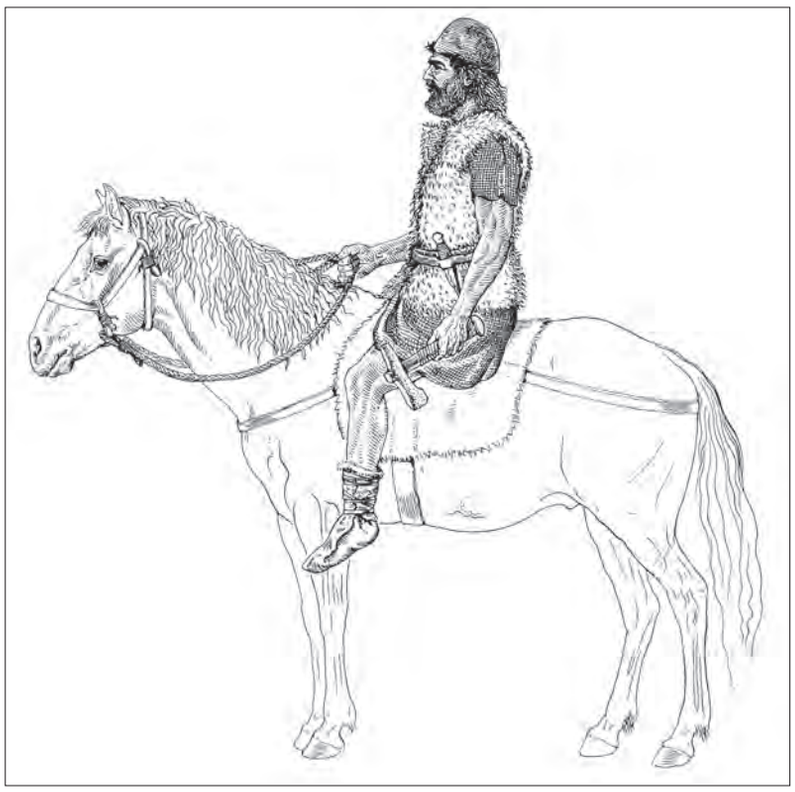

Fig. 1. Common image of "the Corded Ware Culture warrior" (after Probst 1999, p.401).

1998, pp.19-45), the practise of new analytical methods adopted from the natural sciences have become more and more important, which has led to a reconsideration of old views. In the case of the Corded Ware Culture's mobility aspect, one strike against the view that communities traditionally characterized as pastoral are "always on the move" is an instance of recent biomechanical analysis of Corded Ware Culture osteological material (a cross-sectional analysis of 'femoral midshafts' was made in order to test mobility directly from the human skeletal record) which did not support the hypothesis about different mobility patterns in the Late Eneolithic and Early Bronze Age (Sládek *et al.* 2006, p.470ff). Thus, further research may reveal more intriguing facts about Corded Ware Culture organization.

The challenges of the landscape

One question that has arisen concerning the view of Corded Ware Culture bearers as keepers of riding horses and herders of cattle is precisely how the determination is made that they were steppe nomads or forest nomads. What chances would a pastoral subsistence have of surviving in the forest zone, where dense woods thrived?

As stated above, the traditional explanation of the invisibility of Corded Ware Culture settlements was based on the assumption of their nomadic, pastoral subsistence strategy. The absence of settlement features in the Corded Ware Culture period in Central and Eastern Europe has been puzzling since the 19th century, but only recently has the view of Corded Ware Culture bearers as fully nomadic, pastoral communities been rejected. This rejection is based on environmental data (Sládek *et al.* 2006, p.470ff). Czech research emphasises the peculiarity of the relief, namely, that a predominance of hilly terrain in Central Europe is not suitable for a highly mobile way of life, as known, for example, on the Central Asian steppes (Rulf, 1981, p.123ff; Turek, 1995, p.91ff, cited in Sládek *et al.* 2006, pp.470-482). Actually, supporters of migrations who spoke of Corded Ware Culture expansion to the East did not explain the mechanism of mobility in the forest zone (e.g. Anthony 2007, p. 375ff).

Yet another aspect may be connected with the peculiarities of the forest zone during the Late Neolithic. Palaeoecological research reveals a gradual conversion of deciduous to coniferous forests during the period when the Corded Ware Culture began to spread. This environmental change strongly worsened foraging conditions of herbivorous fauna, wild or domestic (Seibutis 2002, p.37ff). Even if one supposes that the routes of the Corded Ware Culture traders extended along the rivers, where forest density was comparatively minor, and that the traders were appearing episodically in the East Baltic (Girininkas 2002, p.85ff), such a scarce type of forest would have been quite problematic in terms of finding feed for the horses, to say nothing of riding.

The horse as a food resource

There are no doubts that Corded Ware Culture bearers were familiar with farming. Evidence comes both from data of numerous finds of domesticated animal bones in settlements and burials as well as from stable isotopes analyses of human individuals, which actually suggest "Neolithic" dietary practises (Eriksson *et al.*

2003, p.17). The initial spread of domestic horses in temperate Europe often is considered to coincide with an increasing opening-up of the east / west corridor of the North European Plain. In the following Corded Ware and Beaker Culture periods, the opening served to transmit important innovations to other areas of Europe. By 2000 BC, horses occurred regularly in Central European Bronze Age sites that have definite evidence of domestication and horses probably were available to a larger part of the population there (Sherratt 1983, p.92ff). While it is known that Funnel Beaker Culture sites have yielded considerable amounts of horse bone, and that in Denmark, many Battle-Axe (Single Grave) Culture burials and settlement sites have been found to contain bones of domestic horses (Barker, 1985), still there is no clear evidence regarding the role of the horse and the purpose of keeping them in these communities as such. The only bits of evidence which suggest horse riding in Europe before 2000 BC are the bridle bit cheek-pieces made of decorated bone found in Hungary and Slovakia, although researchers still agree, that there are little or no data that indicate horses actually were ridden at this stage (Harding 2000, p.170; Renfrew 1990, pp.137ff).

Osteological research of the Late Neolithic East Baltic material is not very helpful for envisioning the horseman. Bones of such animals as sheep, goat, and pig are found in Corded Ware Culture monuments, especially in Estonia (Ianits 1952, p.53ff), but horse bones are absent. Some horse bones found in the Nida settlement are believed to be domesticated (Rimantienė 1989, p.54ff), but they are the only evidence and their domesticated nature is dubious. The earliest remains of the domestic horse in Latvia comes from the Ķivutkalns graves, dated to the middle of the second millennium BC (Vasks *et al.* 1999, p.291ff). Recent interdisciplinary research in Estonia confirmed that there have been no horse bones found in Estonian Corded Ware Culture sites. The older material (Mesolithic, Early Neolithic) contains bones of the wild horse, and only in the Late Bronze Age material does the domestic horse constitute a significant part of the zooarchaeological material. Researchers had to acknowledge that this study did not shed any new light on the early history of the domestic horse in the East Baltic region. (Lõugas *et al.* 2007, p.28).

Moreover, recent research made a heavy impact on the traditional perception of the history of horse riding in general, shifting the beginning of horseback riding to much later times than earlier thought. Elena Kuzmina emphasized that the mastery that was required to control the horse while riding developed among nomads because of their need to control as well as to protect their herds; she came to the conclusion that warrior-horsemen appeared in the steppes not in the fourth millennium BC, but at the end of the second millennium BC (Kuzmina 2000, p.122). Colin Renfrew supported this date (Renfrew 1990, p.137ff). In his newest book, Robert Drews rejected the model he endorsed earlier that riding horses apparently were a common phenomenon on the open steppe by the end of the third millennium. In his more recent work, he states that there is no evidence of regular horse riding on the steppe in the third nor the second millennium BC, and that the great majority of horses were raised there as food animals: the female horses – for breeding and for milking, and the male horses – for slaughtering and eating as soon as they reached adulthood (Drews 2004, p.55). Drews reminds his readers that in Marija Gimbutas's early works, she also considered the horse of the early Kurgan people not a riding animal, but one that "was used for milk and meat and as a sacrificial animal like sheep and cattle" (Gimbutas 1963, p.834, cited in Drews 2004, p.169). His implication is that riding in Neolithic and Bronze Age Europe must be taken on faith since the earliest direct evidence is much later. Furthermore, even if, for the sake of the argument, one concedes that the riding of horses on the steppe might have been more accomplished than it was in the "civilized world," neither on the steppe nor anywhere else could men in the fourth, third, or even second milleniun BC have attained the level of riding expertise needed for mounted combat. The significant change in the material record between the second and the first millenia BC makes it quite clear that in the steppe, as elsewhere, serious riding began after the Bronze Age ended (p. 44-56). While David Anthony maintained his point of view concerning the beginning of riding in the first half of the fourth millennium BC, he also acknowledged the main purpose of the domestication of the steppe horse as a cheap source of winter meat (Anthony 1990, pp.200 and 906).

Concluding remark

The image of the Corded Ware Culture horseman in general is a theoretical construct and primarily is a result of the "migrational" viewpoint in which the horse was associated with transport and military purposes. Research concerning the origins of horseback riding as well as aspects of migrations suggests that treating the horse as a mode of transport along with its assumed degree of mobility could be overestimated when talking about Corded Ware Culture bearers. Nor does recent research support the traditional perception of the nomadic pastoral community and its image of horsemen. While some instances of domesticated horse bones have been discovered in Central Europe during the

same period, they appear to be absent in the East Baltic Corded Ware Culture. Solitary instances of horse bones in East Baltic Corded Ware Culture sites may point to the use of the horse as a food resource.

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ŽIRGO IR RAITELIO ĮVAIZDŽIAI VIRVELINĖS KERAMIKOS KULTŪROS TYRINĖJIMUOSE

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Santrauka

Ilgamečių virvelinės keramikos kultūros tyrinėjimų metu jos bendruomenės dažniausiai buvo apibrėžiamos kaip mobilios ir karingos gyvulių augintojų grupės. Gustavo Kosinos bei Gordono Čaildo iškeltos karių / raitelių ekspansijos idėjos ir Marijos Gimbutienės sukonstruota „Kurganų teorija“ leido įsigalėti virvelinės keramikos kultūros karingo raitelio įvaizdžiui (1 pav.). Auganti migracijų teorijų kritika, duomenų apie jojamąjį žirgą III tūkstantmetyje pr. Kr. trūkumas, europinio kraštovaizdžio netinkamumas keliauti raitomis skatina ieškoti alternatyvių arklio vaidmens reikšmių virvelinės keramikos kultūroje. Nuodugnūs raitininkystės ištakų tyrinėjimai rodo, kad jojimo pradžia reikėtų laikyti ne ankstesnį kaip II tūkstantmečio pr. Kr. laikotarpį, o pirminė arklio prijaukinimo funkcija buvo aprūpinti bendruomenę mėsos atsargomis žiemą, todėl tiek arklio, kaip transporto priemonės, naudojimas, tiek virvelinės keramikos kultūros grupių mobilumo mastas greičiausiai yra pervertinti. Pavieniai prijaukinto arklio kaulų radiniai virvelinės keramikos kultūros paplitimo areale galėtų byloti apie šių bendruomenių arklio naudojimą maistui. Virvelininko, kaip raitelio, vaizdinys iš esmės yra teorinė konstrukcija, kuriai įtakos turėjo didelio masto migracijomis grįstos hipotezės, arklį / žirgą pirmiausia siejančios su transportu ir karyba.