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Claudia Knörle, Valeska Becker

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The paper examines sources that illustrate the treatment of horses in the fifth and fourth centuries BC in Greece and the northern Pontic region. These sources encompass faunal remains, figurative representations, and written sources. They shed light on the training of horses for war, but also on peaceful interactions between humans and animals. Differences and similarities of the depicted and described motives are discussed and set in the overall cultural-historical context.

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Horse; Scythians; Greeks; violence; training; Xenophon.

10.22618/TP.Cheiron.20244.1.148001

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On the Treatment of Horses in the Fifth/Fourth Century BC in Greece and the Northern Pontic Region

Claudia Knörle,1 Valeska Becker2

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In Antiquity, horses played a major role, especially in warfare. Societies like the so-called Scythians, nomadic horse-riders of the steppe regions of Russia, Siberia, Kazakhstan and Ukraine, built their renommée and success on their stunning riding skills and abilities to train their horses for combat. But a functioning cavalry was also an important factor in other cultural spheres, such as the Greek world. The northern Pontic area, where the Greek and the Scythian cultures met, is of special interest in this respect.
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I. Introduction
Cultural exchange between peoples in ancient times sometimes spanned thousands of kilometers. It becomes manifest in objects that were traded over long distances, but also, and more importantly, in certain customs and practices. During the Iron Age, influences from the Mediterranean cultural sphere such as building techniques or the concept of the symposium – along with everything that was needed such as,
for example, special vessels and wine to fill them – can be found at major sites and in princely burials of Central Europe. But such contacts also existed further to the east: In the case of the sphere of the nomadic horse-riders of the northern Pontic regions – the Scythians – the geographical distance was not great, but the differences in the traditions between the Greek and the Scythian worlds are a challenge for researchers. While the Scythians did not leave behind any written sources of their own, there are many surviving Greek texts. They attest to a lively economic and political exchange between the two cultures. The extent of this exchange is difficult to assess in detail today, but it is clear that they influenced each other in various ways. It is the aim of this paper to shed light on one particular sphere: that of the handling, training and riding of horses.

Scythian horse-riders and their rich material culture have been the center of several large exhibitions in the last decade. Reasons for this are easily spotted: be it their custom of creating large, impressive burial mounds (= kurgans) still visible even today in the steppes of Russia, Kazakhstan or Ukraine; be it the fact that the material artifacts they created are often intriguingly decorated with fantastic beasts; that human mummies with stunning tattoos survived the course of time; or the sheer abundance of golden jewelry, vessels, and other objects. But it is not only golden trinkets Scythians are still famous for even today; their outstanding abilities with respect to horse-riding and warfare from horseback were well-known in antiquity.


In this paper, we will explore possible similarities and differences in the treatment, education and handling of horses in an area where Scythian horse-nomads met Greek colonists and engaged in a fruitful exchange with them. Questions to guide us are the nature of sources we can use to find answers, the content of the depictions of the handling and training of horses, as well as horse remains that may illuminate the relations between humans and horses in both cultural spheres.

When we employ the term “Scythian” in this paper, it is not designed to determine a single people, a tribe, or even a uniform group. Rather, this term encompasses groups of horse-riding people with a mostly, but not exclusively, nomadic lifestyle, monumental burial rites, an abundance of artifacts made from precious metals, above all gold, as well as a very distinctive decorative style with high symbolic significance and a repertoire of both mythical and realistic animal depictions.

The Greek world, on the other hand, differed greatly in many aspects. A main difference, apart from the social organization is, obviously, a non-nomadic lifestyle with competing poleis during the fifth and fourth century BC. When we employ the term “Scythian” in this paper, it is not designed to determine a single people, a tribe, or even a uniform group. Rather, this term encompasses groups of horse-riding people with a mostly, but not exclusively, nomadic lifestyle, monumental burial rites, an abundance of artifacts made from precious metals, above all gold, as well as a very distinctive decorative style with high symbolic significance and a repertoire of both mythical and realistic animal depictions.

The Greek world, on the other hand, differed greatly in many aspects. A main difference, apart from the social organization is, obviously, a non-nomadic lifestyle with competing poleis during the fifth and fourth century BC. In this discussion, Attica is in the focus. The reason behind this is the fact that Athens was a cultural center of the Greek world, a city where the arts flourished. A common feature between the Scythian and the Greek world, however, is the status horses had in society. Their speed and beauty, their use in the hunt and in war, made them prestigious animals that were depicted and described in numerous ways. Horses had been a part of Greek art since 1600 BC.

A. Chronological frame and geography

The first horse-riding communities grouped under the umbrella term “Scythians” date back to the ninth/eighth centuries BC, emerging in the vast regions of eastern Siberia, Mongolia and western China. In the course of time, horse-riding nomads can be also found further west, along the steppe regions of Kazakhstan and even in higher altitudes like the Altai mountains, all the way to the northern Caucasus and the areas north of the Black Sea. This last area is especially interesting, because this is where Scythians and Greeks met. However, original Scythian artifacts or objects

9 References to the horse as a prestige animal in ancient Greece in C. Willekes, The Horse in the Ancient World (2016).
showing strong Scythian influences can be found as far as the Carpathian Basin and eastern Central Europe.

For the scope of this paper, we will focus on some of the famous “princely” kurgans in the northern Black Sea area such as Čertomlyk, Solocha, Tolstaya Mogila, Kul’Oba and Kelermes. They present, in many of their finds, an amalgam between the Scythian and the Greek world.

On the other hand, Greek pictorial art will be used for comparison with examples limited to Attica. Their selection is based on the spectrum of positive and negative experiences of horse-human interactions.

**B. Scythians in contact with the Greeks on the Black Sea Coast**

It was at the northern Black Sea coast that Greek settlers and Scythians came in contact for the first time. During the second half of the seventh century AD, the first Greek settlers arrived, and a veritable colonization set off during the sixth century AD, fuelled by fertile soils, regions rich in natural resources and ample space along the coastline, since this was a territory naturally avoided by Scythians. Newly founded Greek settlements could be found along the banks of the Kerch Strait, on western Crimea and on the lower reaches of the rivers Dnieper, Bug, and Dniester. The reasons for the colonization of new areas are manifold; among them are densely settled metropolises in the Greek mainland, wars, and domestic political power struggles.12

In the course of the construction of new settlements such as Olbia, Chersonesos, Theodosia, Tanais, or Pantikapaion, Greeks and Scythians came into contact.13 We have to imagine these contacts on different levels, ranging from peaceful coexistence and trade relations to conflicts. However, they proved to be fruitful on both sides, with Greek prestige goods spilling into Scythian territory and a likewise influence on each other: There is evidence of Greeks visiting Scythia, above all Herodotus who either visited Scythia himself or else had very accurate sources14, and Scythians


14 Cf. the accounts of Scythian customs in Herodot’s Historíai, esp. book IV, which can be verified by archaeological research. Some examples: Scythians used leather made from human skin (Historíai IV,64; Luise Ørsted Brandt et al., “Human and animal skin identified by palaeoproteomics in Scythian leather objects from Ukraine,” PLoS ONE 18(12): e0294129, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0294129); the bodies of dead nobles are specially prepared and filled with seeds of herbs, tigernuts, and sweet-smelling plants (Historíai IV,71; cf. tigernuts as grave-goods in Aržan 2: Reinder Neef, “Die Pflanzenreste,” in Der skythenzeitliche Fürstenkurgan von Aržan 2 in Turan, ed. Konstantin V. Čugunov, Hermann Parzinger and Anatoli Nagler, Arch. Eurasien 26 (Mainz: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 2010), 242-248; embalming of the dead at Pazyryk: Sergei I. Rudenko, Frozen Tombs of Siberia. The Pazyryk Burials of Iron Age Horsemen (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1970), 279-283); when a Scythian king dies, his
traveling to Greece, some of them staying or taking on an education as doctors or vase-painters. We may also mention Anacharsis, a presumed Scythian prince and philosopher who supposedly travelled Greece and was characterized as being wise and curious. The skythai, a police force of some sort, was active in Athens and seems to have counted as much as a thousand men, proudly displaying Scythian clothing.

C. Importance of horses

For Scythians, horses were of utmost importance. They employed them in transportation, but they also consumed horse milk and horse meat and used fur, bones, sinews and inner organs. Mare milk can be fermented to create kumis, a slightly alcoholic beverage containing many vitamins which would be important in an otherwise meat-rich nutrition.

However, relations between humans and horses transcended a mere use-based relationship. Horses were also close friends and companions in battle, which created tight bonds and resulted in friendships in life and death; horses followed their owners, both men and women, into their graves. The numbers of horses found in kurgans can rise to several hundred animals. Usually they are laid down carefully, heads bent to their sides as if resting, and bedded on brushwood or sweet-smelling herbs.

A similar strong attachment to horses can be found in the Greek world. In Athens a horse owner belonged to the second highest of four social classes, since the reforms of 592-591 BC established by Solon. The Athenian cavalry played an important role...
in city life. Over 700 lead tablets were excavated in Athens, bearing information about the cavalry horses, their colours, names of their owners, as well as their condition and their value. Athenian horsemen are depicted on the frieze of the famous Parthenon temple. Skeletal remains of horses, bridles, muzzles and other parts of horse equipment provide evidence for horse keeping in many areas of Greece.

II. Sources

An abundance of sources is available to us with respect to horses and horse-riders in Eurasia of the first millennium BC. Due to the custom of burying beloved and possibly valuable animals with their owners, many kurgans attributed to rider-nomads contain complete horse skeletons, often alongside with tack and adornments. An especially spectacular example for horse burials are ice kurgans from the Altai mountains: The conditions within the frozen interior of the burial chambers and the areas around them are ideal for preserving of skin, hair, and other organic materials such as leather, felt, wool and wood.

A. Faunal remains and DNA analysis

Faunal analysis points to animals with withers heights between 1.12 and 1.52 cm – a span that can probably be related to different breeds with a varied use spectrum. Graves provide evidence for all age classes: young animals that were never ridden or maybe just started training, adult horses, and horses that had already exceeded the age in which they could be ridden.

DNA analysis and remains of fur point to animals with a reddish or brown coat with a dark mane; there is, however, also evidence for black and spotted animals. Some of them were over 20 years old, which points to excellent care and respect.

26 Lepetz, Debue, and Batsukh, “The horses from the graves of the Pazyryk culture,” passim.
When hooves are preserved, they usually show good health and no signs of hunger episodes.

Manes were sometimes cut short, probably to not interfere when using a bow on horseback. The part of the mane close to the withers was left longer, maybe to facilitate mounting.\textsuperscript{28} Ears were cut in different ways, maybe to denote ownership or different breed lines.\textsuperscript{29}

Due to the different climatic conditions, it is no longer possible to say much about the exact coat and mane color of Attic horse burials. But thanks to recent emergency excavations (2012–2020), 14 horse skeletons were uncovered about 4 kilometers outside the modern city of Athens in the bay of Phaleron. Most of them were found in the vicinity of human burials and raise interesting questions, not only because of their particular positioning (differently positioned limbs). The young age of the buried horses, between three and six years, also suggests that the horses did not die a natural death and are connected to the human burials. The withers height of the animals was between 1.20 and 1.40 meters.\textsuperscript{30}

B. Artifacts: bridles, saddles, whips, etc.

From the numerous horse burials, tack and bits have survived.\textsuperscript{31} They were often adorned with floral or figural decorations in bronze, wood, or bone, and even plated in gold or tin. Distinctions were certainly made between everyday riding gear and ceremonial tack. Bits could be in one piece or broken and usually had toggles on the sides for applying pressure on the horse’s cheeks.

Saddles and saddle blankets rarely survived because they were usually made only from organic materials, such as wood, leather, felt, or wool. However, the ice kurgans from the Altai mountains have yielded some astounding saddles with differently coloured leather inlays and wooden pendants, as well as saddle blankets made from felt and leather.\textsuperscript{32} Some horses were adorned with head pieces made from leather and felt in the shape of reindeer or deer antlers or ibex horns, thus creating hybrid

\textsuperscript{28} Rudenko, \textit{Frozen Tombs of Siberia}, 119.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibidem, 117-119.
\textsuperscript{32} Rudenko, \textit{Frozen Tombs of Siberia}, 129-179.
Manes and tails were sometimes encased in colorful and decorated leather or felt coverings.

Examples of equipment for horses found in the Attic area are also known. Metal bits are particularly noteworthy here, as these are the best preserved due to the material. The same applies to spurs, which Attic riders used as aids. Due to the organic material, blankets that were used as riding pads are only known from pictorial art.

C. Figurative representations

Images of horses abound in Scythian art. Standing, relaxing, running, fighting, falling, and dying horses are depicted on a plethora of different materials ranging from cloth and leather to wood, silver and gold. They adorn jewellery, personal belongings such as combs and mirrors, vessels and weapons, being a valuable source for the study of human-horse relations.

33 Ibidem, 179-186.
Figurative representations of horses are likewise known from Greek art (especially Attica). Greeks used their horses neither for agricultural purposes nor for pleasure. Owning horses meant a high standard of living that only a few could afford. In Greek art, they were depicted mainly in the context of war, hunting, mythological scenes and in hippic events, such as horse-racing and chariot-racing. There are also scenes showing the handling of horses. Here, the encounter of human and animal is not always characterized by harmony; violence is shown, as well. But mutual trust and affection are also depicted in the Greek art of the 5th and 4th centuries BC.

Likewise, in Greek contexts horses are portrayed “standing, galloping, fighting, flying, rearing, trotting, cantering, stomping, grazing, lying on their backs, pulling chariots and wheeled vehicles of various types,” as well as being brushed or examined. They are shown, for example, on vases, coins, statues, friezes and reliefs. Different materials, such as marble, clay, bronze and gold, were used as image carriers.

D. Written sources

Although there are no confirmed discoveries of horse stable complexes, a source unknown in Scythian contexts offers further insights into the handling of horses: Greek texts, such as the treatises of the author Xenophon. The writer, militarist and horse expert wrote a horse and riding treatise in the fourth century BC, as well as a treatise on the activities and duties of a cavalry officer.

Xenophon of Athens is thought to have lived between 430 and 354 BC. He came from a wealthy family. In his youth, he therefore enjoyed a high level of education, both physically and mentally. He was a student of Socrates and also learned to ride a horse and became a skilled rider. As an Athenian cavalryman, he spent over ten years of his life in the saddle of a horse. This gave him the opportunity to acquire an immense amount of riding skill and knowledge. When he wrote his treatise on riding, Xenophon was probably already advanced in years, so he wanted to pass on the knowledge he had acquired over many years to future generations. The base of his knowledge about horses were the writings of the Athenian horseman Simon, but only a few fragments of them survived.


36 Markman, The Horse in Greek Art.
37 The extent to which this applies to reality remains questionable. However, Mattusch’s statement largely applies to pictorial art. Carol C. Mattusch, “Περί Ιππικής: On Ancient Greek Horsemanship,” in Schertz, 53.
38 Ibidem, 55.
39 Horses in mythological scenes are not included in this paper.
41 This only applies to archaeological excavations; stables can be found in art: https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/255939.
42 Xenophon, On the art of horsemanship; Xenophon On the cavalry commander. For Xenophon and his work, see M. A. Flower, The Cambridge Companion to Xenophon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).
43 Klaus Widdra, Xenophon - Reitkunst (Schondorf: wu-wei-Verlag, 2006), 14.
III. Treatment of horses in Scythian and Greek context

The following is a comparison of various activities which can be observed in Scythian and Greek contexts using the sources described above. Not everything is attested in both cultural phenomena; even so, such discrepancies of what was selected to be depicted, similarities or differences regarding certain activities can shed light on the treatment of horses.

A. Catching a horse

The catching of horses that used to live, for the largest part of the year, relatively free in the steppe and under the supervision of special herdsmen, is depicted on the central frieze of the Čertomlyk amphora, a spectacular silver, partly gilded vessel from an enormous kurgan with several burials dating to the fourth century BC. The frieze also allows an assessment of the difference between untamed and tamed horses, for the tamed animals have their mane already cut so as not to get in the way of a rider using a bow on horseback, whereas the untamed animals still have a long, wavy mane.

B. Mounting

The same central frieze of the Čertomlyk amphora shows a detailed imagery of the training of a horse to kneel. The horse has its head bowed down, extending the right front leg and flexing the left leg. The kneeling allows a rider to quickly get on and off the horse, which is especially important for an armed and therefore heavy rider or a sick or hurt person in a time where stirrups were still not in use. Depictions of kneeling horses can also be found on other Scythian and Near Eastern artwork, such as a torque from Kul’-Oba, the gorytos (container for the bow) from Solocha or a rhyton from Erebuni. The Čertomlyk amphora shows that the training was hard, almost brutal; several men held the animal down, presumably with ropes that were represented by small chains not preserved anymore. We may even assume that a rope was laid around the horse’s neck to deprive it of air and force it to obey. This cruel treatment assured quick and sustainable results. In times of war, it was mandatory that the horse performed the kneeling reliably for the warriors to get quickly on and off, which could be a question of life and death.

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45 Rolle, Zum Figurenrelief, 225.
A second horse to the left of the scene described here seems to be subjected to a similar training, but with a different method: A man tries to coax the animal to kneel by flexing the horse’s left front leg, while at the same time pulling the reins.

Mounting a horse was also a topic of Greek images. A red-figure column-krater in the British Museum dated to ca. 450-430 BC shows a riding lesson. A nude boy is mounting a horse, having grasped the mane and trying to throw his left leg over the animal’s back. Whether this is successful in the end remains open to the viewer. Next to the horse and the mounting boy are two other men: a bearded man, who is wreathed and bald over the forehead, assists the boy with his right hand. There is also an ephebos with his himation, looking at the scene. The horse seems to stand calmly, even if its head is raised in discomfort. The hind legs are closed, while the front legs are in a walking position. An inexperienced rider mounting can be very...
unpleasant for the horse, so the upturned head is not surprising. The fact that the horse still stands reasonably calmly speaks for its good qualities as a training horse. Xenophon also describes the mounting, which should be fast and with weapons, especially in the context of war, and should therefore be practiced.

When he has swung himself up to sit, he pulls his body up with his left hand, and by stretching out his right hand, he lifts himself up at the same time. If he sits up like this, he will not present a disgraceful sight from behind. With his lower leg bent, he does not first place his knee on the horse’s backbone, but immediately throws his shin over to the right side, and when he has swung his foot over, he also places his hind cheeks on the horse.

Xenophon does not mention the Scythian method of advancement, but it would have been an easier method for the armed Greeks, as well. Xenophon does, however, mention how important it was to move quickly in war.

Fig. 4. Column-krater, ca. 450-430 BC, British Museum London, Inv. No. E485 (Neils – Oakley 2003, 254 Abb. oben rechts)

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49 Ibidem, 7,4.
C. Training for war

The training of a horse to kneel down was an invaluable skill especially in war, for a full set of Scythian armor could weigh around 20 kg, and mounting and dismounting quickly was vital. A lying horse could have also been used as a cover and protection, although there is no way of knowing whether this was actually done.

Likewise, other aspects may have been trained that were, however, not depicted or written down in any literary sources. Still, it is likely that, for example, horses were trained to reach a certain level of insensitivity to small wounds, noises (twangling of bowstring; screams of humans and animals), and smells (blood, fire, smoke). Fearlessness, attention to the surroundings and trust in the rider as well as absolute obedience paired with independence and confidence may have been character traits that were preferred in horses.

Fig. 5. Golden comb from Solocha (Alekseev 2007, 247 Abb. 5)


51 Rolle, Die Welt der Skythen.
A gold comb from the Solocha burial mound (end of fifth century BC) displays a horse and rider in combat, with the rider in heavy armour (helmet, shield, possible breastplate) and the agitated horse, slightly rearing; it is also possible that this behaviour was trained so that horses would kick and use their hooves against enemies. A second, dead or dying horse at the feet of the scene allows a glimpse into the harsh realities of battle. Falling and fleeing horses, dragging their dead or dying riders, were depicted on the sword sheath from Čertomlyk.

One example of a Greek battle scene is a loutrophoros from Athens from the third century BC. Five people and two horses can be seen. Next to a naked prisoner is a person kneeling on the ground, while one of the horses is approaching at a delayed gallop, which visually resembles rearing. The victorious rider of this horse controls the animal while he lunges with a weapon no longer preserved, which was

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supplemented in a different material, and aims it at the person sitting on the ground. Next to the lifeless body lying on the ground, another horse can be seen galloping, on which a person can be seen lying down and sliding off the horse in the next moment. Thanks to an inscription above the scene, this funerary monument can be attributed to the Athenian cavalryman Philon. The deceased can be seen in the victorious horseman, while his main opponent, the enemy cavalryman, falls dead from his horse.\footnote{Olga Palagia, \textit{Cavalry Battles beyond Dexileos}, in \textit{Hippos. The Horse in Ancient Athens}, ed. Jennifer Neils and Shannon M. Dunn (Athen: ASCSA 2022), 202-204.}

![Fig. 7. The marble loutrophoros of Philon (Walter-Karydi 2015, Abb. 185)](image)

The selection of suitable horses for war would have been an important act both for the Scythians and Greeks. A cup from the middle of the fifth century BC, which is in the collection of the Göttingen Institute of Classical Archaeology, bears a \textit{dokimasia} scene on the exterior, which is continued on the interior.\footnote{Göttingen Institute of Classical Archaeology, Inv. no. K 714, Norbert Eschbach, \textit{CVA 92, Bd. 4, Archäologisches Institut der Universität Göttingen, Attisch-Rotfigurige Keramik} (München: Beck, 2012), 118-120.} The \textit{dokimasia} involved the inspection of horses in Athens with the purpose of determining whether they were suitable for military service.\footnote{On the \textit{dokimasia}, see: Frederic S. Borowski, “Dokimasia: A Study in Athenian Constitutional Law” (Ann Arbor: Univ. Microfilms Internat., 1979), 27-49; Jennifer Neils, \textit{The cavalry inspection}, in \textit{Hippos. The Horse in Ancient Athens}, ed. Jennifer Neils and Shannon M. Dunn (Athen: ASCSA 2022), 198-199.} On the exterior, six men and two horses are depicted. On the interior of the cup, a male figure wearing a himation can be seen again, as well as the rear part of a horse, part of a rectangular object and another object that seems to be hanging on the wall. The same object is also found in the exterior scene. This is a twitch, an object that is still used today in almost the same...
form. To use it, the round part is placed around the upper lip of the horse and closed and tied with a string. This procedure releases opioids, calming the horse down and lowers their sensitivity to pain, which is why they remain calm and relaxed. This helps, for example, when examining and assessing restless horses. It explains why the object was kept ready during a *dokimasia*. The whole process of *dokimasia* is part of the preparations for war. Xenophon describes the following training of chosen horses for war in detail: the campagne school trains the horse to jump, to be courageous and to respect the commands of its rider even in extreme situations.

![Fig. 8. Red-figure cup, ca. 450 BC, Archaeological Institute of the University of Göttingen Inv. No. K 714 (CVA Göttingen (4), Taf. 51 Abb. 1).](image)

![Fig. 9. Red-figure cup, ca. 450 BC, Archaeological Institute of the University of Göttingen (K 714) (CVA Göttingen (4), Taf. 51 Abb. 2)](image)

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58 Widdra, *Xenophon - Reitkunst*, 145-146.
Fig. 10. Red-figure cup, ca. 450 BC, Archaeological Institute of the University of Göttingen Inv. No. K 714 (CVA Göttingen (4), Taf. 52 Abb. 1)

D. Peace and rest

A beautiful example of resting and relaxing horses can be found on a gold pectoral from a woman’s grave in Tolstaya Mogila. It is clearly a piece fabricated by a Greek artist, commissioned by a Scythian.59 The Greek craftsmanship is obvious from the great naturalism of the piece and the scenic depictions, as well as some typical Greek elements such as palmettes and lotus flowers,60 whereas the content is genuinely Scythian. The pectoral is structured into two main decorative zones held together by floral ornaments as probable symbols of a tree of life. While the outer zone of the pectoral displays chaos, death and destruction, evidenced by terrible animals of prey such as griffins, panthers, and lions killing horses, stags and wild boars, the inner zone is one of peace, calm and fertility. Here, horses can be seen resting, scratching their bellies with one hoof or nursing foals. Although humans are also represented in this zone, there is no interaction between them and the horses, underlining a depiction of peace and calm.

60 Schiltz, Die Skythen und andere Steppenvölker, 203.
Peace and rest, but with contact between human and horse, is shown on an Attic red-figure kylix dating to around 490 BC (Metropolitan Museum of New York, inv. no.1989.281.71). The interior scene depicts a horse and a boy with negroid features, who is probably a slave.⁶¹ The horse, a stallion, has its left front and hind legs raised, but does not appear to be moving. The head is drawn close to the chest and the tail is close to the body. The mouth is slightly open, and the ears are laid back rather than erect. The man or boy has his right hand placed on the horse’s back. His left hand is holding an object that is unanimously addressed in research as a brush or similar. He looks at this object while holding it up in the air. The male’s right leg is pondered, while his left leg is placed on the ground. The part of his body that is visible is naked. The horse is tied with the help of a ring. The rope and the halter were painted in a different colour. Another object hanging from the wall could have also served for grooming the horse although it could also be a broom. Research assumes that this is a foreign slave grooming the horse. The behaviour of the horse can be interpreted as restless. This can be recognized by the pawing left front leg, as well as the stamping left hind leg. The fact that horses show this behaviour when tethered has a natural cause: the flight animal is restricted in its range of motion, which can lead to restlessness, especially in younger and temperamental animals. Despite this behaviour, the act of grooming can be classified as a positive experience of the animal’s interaction with humans. Xenophon also deals extensively with the grooming of horses, as this contributes significantly to their well-being and also strengthens their bond with humans. Xenophon recommends starting grooming at foal age.

You should also touch and stroke: touching and stroking those parts of
the body that are most beneficial to the horse. These parts of the body are
the most hairy parts of the body and then the parts where the horse can
hardly help itself if something hurts there.\(^6\)

In nature, grooming can be observed between two horses that are close to each
other. In Attic pottery, this motif is not singular: On a black-figure amphora from
the early fifth century B.C., a groom can be seen grooming a horse that raises its head
in the air, stretching its lips forward.\(^6\) The horse’s behaviour can be interpreted as a
“face of pleasure,”\(^6\) clearly showing that grooming has positive connotations. The
manner in which the groom has to groom the horse is already given in great detail by
the author Xenophon:

When (the groom) grooms the horse, he must start from the head and
mane, for if the upper parts of the body are not clean, it is in vain to clean
the lower ones. On all the rest of the body, he must raise the hair with all
the cleaning tools and sweep off the dust, not in the natural direction of
the hair, but against the grain. On the other hand, he must not touch the
hair above the backbone with any tool, but only rub and smooth it with
his hands, this time with the grain, because in this way he will do the least
harm to the mount of the horse.\(^5\)

Grooming horses represents an adaptation of the intra-species mutual grooming
by humans: By grooming the horse, the human not only cleans it and thus prevents
injury from equipment placed on dirt, but also ensures that blood circulation to the
body is optimized. But most importantly, by doing so, he imitates another friendly
horse, creating a bond and an increased sense of well-being. Thus, over time, more
trust is created and the horse relaxes in the presence of the human.\(^6\)


\(^{63}\) Tampa Museum of Art, Joseph Veach Noble Collection (1986.029), Schertz and Stribling “The Horse in Ancient Greek Art,” cat. No. 56, 118.

\(^{64}\) “Facial expressions that emphasize pleasure and indicate an expected or already increased well-being.
The typical facial expression - also known as the grooming face - is shown during solitary or social skin
and fur care. The following varying mimic features appear: neck stretched horizontally, turned to the
side or even arched or head held to the side; somewhat tense facial muscles with upper lip partly pushed
forward like a snout [...].” Gerry M. Neugebauer and Julia K. Neugebauer, *Lexikon der Pferdesprache*
(Stuttgart: Ulmer, 2011), 76-77.

\(^{65}\) Xenophon, *On Horsemanship*, 5,5.

\(^{66}\) “In human care, grooming the horse can contribute to a strong social bond and great trust,”
Fig. 12. Red-figure kylix, ca. 490 BC, Metropolitan Museum of New York Inv. No. 1989.281.71 (Schertz – Stribling 2017, 118 Abb. 57)

Fig. 13. Black-figure neck amphora, 500-475 BC, Tampa Museum of Art Inv. No. 1986.029 (Schertz – Stribling 2017, 118 Abb. 56, oben)
E. Violent treatment

We may safely assume that a certain amount of violence in the training of horses was employed. Evidence for this is found on the already described Čertomlyk amphora and the rather rough training methods that may have included the deprivation of oxygen and the applying of physical force to coerce a horse to do as desired.

Other examples are horse bones with pathologies that resulted from mistreatment and excessive use. For example, fractures on thoracic vertebrae, exostoses (pathological new formations of bone) between vertebrae and osteophytes (bone outgrowths that can form in worn joints or between two vertebrae) could be observed in several cases; also, fusions of lumbar vertebrae were noted. These pathologies occur when horses are ridden for an extended amount of time or by a rider who is too heavy. Also, they can be caused by the saddles of the time, which were constructed in a way so that the weight of the rider constantly pushed on the spino processes of the thoracic vertebrae. A badly fitting saddle can also cause problems when jumping. Horses with the afflictions mentioned above would have suffered severely or might even have become lame.

The beating of horses is not shown on Scythian artifacts; however, such a situation seems to be shown on a relief from the National Archaeological Museum of Athens (inv. no. 4464). It is a funerary stele consisting of two pieces on which a horse and a boy can be seen. Since the tail of the horse is missing, the possible existence of a third piece is conceivable. The marble funerary relief is dated to the late fourth century BC. The boy, who presumably represents an African slave, is wearing a chiton as well as boots. He is depicted in a striding position. His left hand is raised, while with his right hand he holds a staff-like object with which he is reaching backward. He looks towards the horse, which is wearing a panther skin on its back. The horse has its head raised and its mouth open. The hind legs are in a crotch position and the left front leg is raised. Kaltsas interprets the animal’s behaviour as one of alarm. He names the activity of the groom as the reason for the animal’s raised head: The groom seems to lunge with the stick in his right hand to hit the animal with it. Xenophon initially advises against beating horses.

But those who try to force it with blows make it even more frightened, because the horses then believe, when they receive harsh treatment for such things, that what they shy away from is to blame.

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68 Levine et al., Palaeopathology and Horse Domestication, 130 f.


71 Xenophon, On Horsemanship, 6,15.
However, he alters his statement when it comes to teaching a horse to jump during cross-country training.

If it doesn’t want to do that, hit it quite hard with a whip or a stick; then it will not only jump across the whole width, but much further than required. In the future, you don’t have to beat it anymore, it will jump as soon as it sees someone coming up behind it.72

Also noteworthy is the horse’s movement with its left front leg: it keeps this leg raised and bent, while the rest of its legs also appear to be in motion. This sudden raising and lowering of a limb of the horse is called stamping in behavioural research.73 This behaviour is the horse’s reaction to being beaten by the groom. In this context, it can be classified as frustration at this kind of punishment, which, however, also represents a protest against it.74

The question remains why such a depiction and this kind of behaviour have found their way into pictorial art. A possible explanation is that a resisting horse always represents temperament, character, courage, and strong will. Although education is not always easy here, this horse will advance more courageously in hunting and warfare than a horse that is easier to tame and reacts less courageously during education. However, it is equally conceivable to display all stages of horse training as well as both negative and positive facets of dealing with horses during this period.


72 Xenophon, On Horsemanship, 8.4.
73 “Abrupt raising and rapid lowering of a front and hind limb. The hoof or the entire sole surface is forcefully placed on the ground, creating a loud noise.” Neugebauer, Neugebauer, Lexikon der Pferdesprache, 148.
74 Neugebauer and Neugebauer, Lexikon der Pferdesprache, 149.
F. Control and trust

On another relief from the National Archaeological Museum of Athens, the interaction between man and horses is depicted. A votive relief, dating to 430-420 BC and only partially preserved, depicts a naked youth wearing a chlamys, with two horses standing in front of him. The right hand of the young man is directed towards the forehead of the horse behind. The left hand is at the level of the two mouths of the animals. Of the horses only the heads, necks, breasts and one foreleg from each are visible. The legs indicate that the horses are in motion. Kaltsas interprets the movement of the youth as putting reins over the horses. This assumes that the reins were painted or indicated in another material, because these are no longer preserved. In any case, it seems to be a truthful moment of interaction between horses and the Attic youth. The situation would be easier to interpret if the rest of the scene had been preserved. The young man controls the horses because they see him as a barricade and calm down their movements. This ideal scene on a votive relief seems to be a mixture of trust and education between horse and human.

Fig. 15. Votive relief, 430-420 BC, National Museum of Athens, Inv. No. 1394 (Kaltsas 2002, 131, Abb. 250).

76 Ibidem, 131.
IV. Conclusion

Even though sources for the evaluation of the treatment of horses differ in the Scythian and the Greek cultural spheres, the small selection presented here, consisting of written, figurative, and faunal evidence, shows a wide range of different actions: peaceful rest, care and grooming, but also activities connected to one of the main uses of horses, namely war. This encompassed the selection of suitable animals and their often harsh and cruel training. Parallels can be found in the choice of the respective themes in the visual art of the Scythians and Greeks. But the cultural exchange is also tangible beyond this, for example in that the Tolstaya Mogila pectoral was made from the hand of a Greek artist in terms of technique, and the overall concept of scenic representations that was introduced into the Scythian world by Greek artists.

Above all, however, there are also differences that become clear. Resting, peaceful horses in Scythian depictions are shown by themselves, free from human interference and interaction.

Training methods also differed in Scythian and Greek spheres, although they came along in both cases with cruelty and violence which encompassed beatings, deprivation of oxygen, and sheer force. The use of horses in battle ensued further pain and suffering, as is illustrated on figurative depictions and also evidenced by faunal remains exhibiting painful lesions.

The imagery of the Greeks hand shows above all an institutionalized form of interaction with the horse. In most cases, there is an invisible third party behind the person depicted with the animal: in the dokimasia, this is the state, but the slaves interacting with the horses on the tomb relief in the National Museum of Athens or on the Kylix from New York are also acting on behalf of someone else. The situation is similar with pictures showing equestrian races, hunting motifs or pictures with horses in the context of war. Although Xenophon wrote as a private individual, he also addressed his writings to cavalrymen who were planning to go to war for the poleis or at least to prepare their horses for this eventuality. It is therefore all the more interesting to consider the intention behind the detailed depiction of the handling of horses. The horse is controlled as a domesticated creature, is sedated or domesticated in case of disobedient behaviour, but also receives care and attention in order to be ready for use in war, hunting or for representative purposes.

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