

Horses of Mongolia, Part 3

The Horses That Conquered the World

The stocky dun stallion stood between me and his mares as they grazed the late winter ground and moved past the ger towards the spring. He wasn't taking any chances on having his harem stolen by an odd-looking stranger. The sun was going down and it was starting to get cold, but this was too good a photo op to miss. It was my first trip to Mongolia in April of 2005 to participate in an Earthwatch Institute sponsored argali sheep study in the Ikh Nartiin Chuluu (Great Sun Mountain) Nature Reserve. The horses were an unexpected bonus.

Mongol herders ride what are almost certainly the toughest horses in the world. They are around 14 hands high and they are true horses, not ponies. The first ones I saw were mostly shaggy and thin, having just survived a Mongolian winter in which the temperature can plunge to -40F. They get no supplemental feed and no shelter, but are left to range on their own, so only the strongest survive. The mares with foals seemed to be in the worst shape, but they still had presence and attitude to spare. I was struck by how long and luxurious their manes and tails were, even with ribs showing through their thick winter coats.

The Mongols are the original and quintessential horse culture. Today's Mongol horse is the direct descendant of the horses Chinggis Khan and his Horde rode as they spread out across Asia and the Middle East to the gates of Vienna, creating the largest empire the world has ever seen.

Administratively, it was held together by an incredible messenger system of riders, probably adapted from the Chinese, that makes the Pony Express look like a canter in the park. It was called the "Yam". Post stations were one day apart, about 25 or 30 miles and were stocked with horses and fodder. According to Marco Polo, an urgent message might be carried 200-300 miles per day!

It is estimated that each Mongol soldier took about five horses with him on a military campaign and that sometimes dummies were tied to the backs of the extras to make the army look bigger than it actually was. The horses were expected to go 60-80 miles a day over any terrain. "The Secret History of the Mongols", almost the only account of their history written by the Mongols themselves says "Think that you are to travel far and wide. Take good care of the mounts of your soldiers before you get them jaded.....Once a gelding is already too emaciated and thin, caring will not do any good....hunt sparingly...Except during the moderate hunting, do not allow your soldiers to fix cruppers to the saddles! Let the bit of the bridle hang free! If they abide by this order, the soldiers will not be able to race at full gallop. Impose this order and seize those who transgresses (sic) and punish by beating." I suspect that going fast for the fun of it was as popular among young men in the 13th century as it is today. Only the means have changed.

These are true domestic horses, not to be confused with the takhi, who no one has ever successfully ridden. They come in every color- black, white, grey, buckskin, dun, brown, pinto, you name it. In "The Secret History of the Mongols" a man named Bodonchar rides an "gris-amber horse with pearl-grey dorsal stripe and scraggy tail". Some today have a dorsal stripe or upright mane or leg stripes, which indicates a probable cross in the past with takhi. These horses are quite prized by the Mongols. Calling them "domestic", however, can be somewhat misleading. They can be a real handful to catch, saddle and mount. The process has been compared to a rodeo by more than one Western writer who has traveled across the Mongolian countryside on them.

Children, both boys and girls, are first put on a horse at the same time they learn to walk, about age

two. The wooden saddles have good-sized silver studs on the side to encourage the rider to stand up instead of sit. More than one westerner has found this very challenging.

Not surprisingly, horse racing is very popular and is considered, along with wrestling and archery, to be one of the "three manly sports". The jockeys are usually children between the ages of five and twelve. The courses are cross-country with distances of 15 or 30 kilometers. (One such race was the centerpiece for the PBS Nature series episode "Wild Horses of Mongolia", which featured Julia Roberts. It was filmed in 1989. When I was there last year and people found out I was an American, they immediately exclaimed about Julia Roberts and how wonderful it was that a famous actress like her would live with a country family. It's available on DVD and I highly recommend it as a great look at the Mongols and their horses.)

Day to day, however, the horse is the indispensable partner of the herder. They are used for basic transportation and for herding livestock, which are traditionally described as the "Five Snouts"; horse, sheep, goat, camel, cow. One sees plenty of evidence of modern life at the average country ger these days (solar panels, satellite dishes, a motorbike or truck are not uncommon), but I almost always saw a horse hobbled near the ger, saddled and bridled and ready to go, as has been true for over 1000 years. When a herdsman needs to catch an animal, since they are all wandering at large in a country about twice the size of Texas that has almost no fences, he uses a long pole with rope loop on the end called an "urga", instead of a rope-only lasso.

The other important function of the Mongolian horse is to provide mare's milk for a variety of food items, from cheese to the famous "airag" (or khoumiss). This is made by boiling the milk and skimming off the cream, which is placed outside in an uncovered container until it is dry and hard. It is called "aruul" and I was given a bag of it which I keep in our freezer (it would spoil quickly in our higher humidity) for an occasional snack. The remaining milk is stirred with a long stick in a cowhide bag hung next to the door of the ger until it ferments. I was lucky enough to get to try it last year since it was late fall and it's mostly available in the summer. I liked it and found that it tasted like fizzy yogurt. Mare's milk is also being used as a base for moisturizer creams as part of economic development efforts.

It is said that Mongol songs have one of three subjects. In order of importance: horses, the land and mothers. Some of the songs on one of my Mongolian music CD's are "Sanchju Gelem" or Beautiful Horse, "Khalkh Shonon Charyn Jawdal" or The Ride of the Khalkh Horses and "Erdene Sasghn Unaga" or Foals from Erdene. "Kalkh" is the name ethnic Mongols call themselves. Even so, the Mongols are practical people and the horses aren't given names in the western fashion. The name is usually related to the animal's color.

On both of my trips to Mongolia, my focus was on wildlife in general and, on the second trip, takhi in particular. But I have found that the Mongolian horses (and also the domestic bactrian camels) are compelling subjects also. Since they are more of a type than a Western style breed of horse which is expected to adhere in appearance and basic temperament to a specific standard, the physical variation and individuality of the Mongolian horses provide endless design and color possibilities for an artist. One of my goals for my next trip to Mongolia is to make sure that I have time to draw them (and the takhi) from life and not just take photographs. The opportunity to spend this kind of time with them will make it possible for me to get to know better the horses that conquered the world.

I want to thank Sarah Crampton for her support in publishing this series. There are a number of websites that you can visit for more information about the takhi and Mongolia in general. Here are a

few:

-takh.org/index_english.html and www.tourdevalat.org for information about the KhominTal release project

-owc.org.mn/macne/hustai/index.htm for information about Hustai National Park, which has a support group that you can join

-takhi.org- the site of the International Takhi Group

-mongolia-web.com- a little bit of everything; news, information, shopping

-mongoliatourism.gov.mn- "the official tourism website"

-lonelyplanet.com/worldguide/destinations/asia/mongolia- they also publish the standard guidebook on Mongolia, which is a must-have if you are going there

Photo captions:

1. Mongol horse mare and foal
2. Mongol horse stallion

Paintings:

1. Gobi Roundup
2. Ready to Ride