

The Dawn of Chivalry

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The horseman, mastering a beautiful animal and towering over the man walking on his own feet, had a traditional sense of superiority and felt little more than contempt for the digger of the soil. In primitive societies, when the horseman was a herder, the two life styles—that of nomadic herdsman and peasant behind his plough—were considered mutually exclusive. This age-old antagonism showed itself even as late as the range wars of the American West, when cowhands fought homesteaders.

On the more romantic side, the dashing horseman made a deep impression on those outside of his culture. The centaur, the Amazon warrior-maiden, the Hun, the Tartar of the Golden Horde, the medieval knight in shining armor, the Saracen, the dazzling Napoleonic hussar and cuirassier, the Plains Indian and the cowboy under the “big blue sky,” all were looked upon with a mixture of awe and a delicious shudder that became greater the more remote they became in time and distance.

The horsemen *par excellence* of classical antiquity were the Scythians, who lived on the plains north of the Black Sea beyond the borders of Greek civilization. Roaming the steppes east of the Scythians, were tribes that Herodotus called the Sauromatae, who were thought to be the offspring of Scythians and Amazons. Later, in Roman times, called the Sarmatians, they showed up in

the west—as the first heavy armored cavalry (*cataphractarii*) in Europe. When the Huns came from Central Asia and in A.D. 375 shattered the Ostrogothic Empire that had been established in the former lands of the Scythians, agricultural Germanic tribes—Goths, Burgundians, and the much-maligned Vandals—as well as nomadic tribes from the steppes, such as the Alans, cousins of the Scythians and Sarmatians, were driven from their eastern homes and set adrift westward. The uprooted Germanic warriors successfully adopted the nomads' cavalry equipment, and from the blending of the two cultures emerged what became a fundamental concept of the medieval world, chivalry.

In 378 the Gothic-Alanic cavalry wiped out a Roman army at Adrianople, a victory that heralded the dominance of the heavy armored horseman on the medieval battlefield. Groups of Alans set themselves up as local aristocracies in northern Spain (Catalonia: Goth-Alania) and northern France (Aalençon). Chivalry developed into its final form when another wave of Germanic warriors, the Normans, came to northern France and took up the horsemanship of the Alanic gentry. (The Battle of Hastings, in 1066, was decided by the time-honored nomad tactic of feigned retreat, executed by the left wing of the Norman cavalry commanded by the



1. Sarmatian chief clad in scale armor. Fluttering behind him is the distinctive Sarmatian battle standard, a dragon made like a windsock. Fragments of a funeral stele from the Roman camp at Chester, England. Chester Museum. Photo: Chester Archaeological Society. From *The Sarmatians* (New York, 1970), pl. 46.

Count of Brittany, who had the telltale name Alan the Red.)

By the first century the Sarmatians had moved from their homeland between the Black and Caspian seas to the banks of the Danube, where they clashed with outposts of the Roman Empire. In 175 the emperor Marcus Aurelius made a treaty with the westernmost Sarmatian tribe, the Iazyges, who occupied Pannonia, today's Hungary, and hired 8,000 of them to serve in the Roman army. Fifty-five hundred Iazyges cavalrymen were sent to northern Britain to fight the troublesome Picts. After their twenty-year term of service expired, they were not permitted to return home but were settled in Bremetennacum, the modern Ribchester in Lancashire, where their descendants were still listed in the fifth century as "the troop of Sarmatian veterans" (see Figure 1).

As the first heavy armored cavalry in western Europe, the Sarmatians wore segmented helmets and scale body armor; even their horses were protected by scale covers and bronze-studded leather chanfrons. For their distinctive battle standard, Sarmatian troops carried a dragon made like a windsock on a pole; it had a metal head and a red fabric body that writhed when the wind blew through its jaws. They worshiped their tribal god in the form of a sword stuck upright into a small stone plat-

form. These details may resemble uncannily some of the more familiar motifs from the stories surrounding King Arthur, and it is interesting to note further that the commander (*praefectus*) of the Legio VI Victrix, to which the Sarmatian auxiliaries in Britain were assigned, was a certain Lucius Artorius Castus, who had served in Pannonia. The Sarmatians undoubtedly welcomed a commander familiar with their homeland, perhaps even their customs and language; possibly they turned his name, Artorius, into a title—the way Caesar became Kaiser and Tsar. During the fifth century, when the "historical" Arthur is supposed to have lived, this title might have been used by a great British chieftain. In addition, the earliest source that mentions Arthur, the *Historia Britonum* of Nennius shortly before 800, gives three city names in a list of twelve battles won by Arthur, and all three (one of which seems to be an abbreviated form of Bremetennacum) were garrisons of Sarmatians or heavy armored cavalry in Roman times.

An integral part of chivalry was chivalrous literature, especially the Arthurian legends. Judging from nomads in historical and modern times, it can be assumed that the early Scythians, Sarmatians, Alans, and Huns possessed a highly developed epic tradition (since it was oral, the term "literature" is not quite fitting). In fact,



2. *Warrior resting (probably a scene from a legend), plaque. Gold, length 16.2 cm. (6 $\frac{3}{8}$ in.). Siberian collection of Peter I. Hermitage, Si 1727, 1/161. (Cat. no. 95, color plate 21).*

the great western European epics, the Nibelungen and Dietrich cycles and the Arthurian legends, were composed around heroes who lived during the fifth century, the period of the greatest influx of steppe nomads into western Europe.

Among the gold plaques from the Siberian collection of Peter the Great are two pairs with human representations. One pair shows a rider pursuing a boar; the other (Figure 2) a woman sitting under a tree with a man stretched out resting his head in her lap, while two horses and a groom stand by. This idyllic scene has been recognized as a distinctive motif appearing in the medieval legend of St. Ladislav of Hungary, in the Hungarian folk ballad *Ana Molnár*, and in the ancient Turkish epic about the hero Targhyn (whose name has the same root as *Pendragon*). In western Europe this motif is featured in Ekkehard of St. Gall's epic poem *Waltharius* (about 940), in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* (about 1200), and in Sir Thomas Malory's *Sir Balin and Sir Balan* (about 1470, after French sources of about 1250). *Waltharius*, fleeing from the Huns who had held him hostage, is armed "in the manner of the Pannonians" with two swords (which might explain why these gold plaques, originally scabbard mounts, are in pairs), and both Arthurian heroes, *Parzival* and *Sir Balin*, carry two swords. (After *Sir Balin*'s death one of his swords is

stuck into a marble block by Merlin.) Furthermore, *Parzival* and *Sir Balin* are heroes connected with the quest for the Holy Grail, the sacred vessel that inspired visions of bliss, and it is intriguing that the Scythians—and the Siberian nomads, as we have learned from their frozen tombs—used special cauldrons to burn hashish on hot stones and inhaled the fumes, according to Herodotus, "shouting for joy." The other scene on the gold plaques, the boar hunt, brings to mind Arthur's earliest supernatural adventure, reported by Nennius, the hunt for the boar *Trwch Troynt*.

Finally, the story of the sword *Excalibur* (which at Arthur's death is thrown into the water after the knight entrusted with this task had hesitated twice to do so) has direct parallels in the epic of the death of *Batradz*, the tribal hero of the Ossetians of the Caucasus, and in the episode of the death of *Krabat*, included in a folk tale of the Sorbs of eastern Germany. The Ossetians are the last surviving group of Sarmatian-speaking people, and the Sorbs, though now speaking a Slavic language, are an isolated group still bearing a Sarmatian tribal name. "Excalibur," incidentally, in its earliest form "Caliburnus," is clearly derived from the Latin word for steel, *chalybs*, which comes from a Greek word derived from the name of the Sarmatian *Kalybes*, a tribe of smiths in the Caucasus.