

THE HORSEMAN TYPE ON MEDIEVAL EUROPEAN COINAGE

by Robert Tye

Account of the Use of Horseman Types

The earliest European coins, those of the Greek city states, show a wide variety of obverse types. All manner of objects, animal, vegetable and mineral, each acting as the badge of some issuing state or other. Later on, Greeks converged upon a single type of design to adorn the obverse of their coins, that of the profile bust, either of a patron deity, or of the ruler of the state. In Roman times this process was taken close to its ultimate conclusion. Only exceptionally is any Roman coin seen that does not bear on its obverse the profile bust of the emperor.

Early in the medieval period, the set of obverse types began to widen. In the barbarian areas of the periphery we briefly approach the rank diversity of the earliest times - in such issues for instance as the early English Anglo-Saxon coinages. However, during the ascendancy of the Christian medieval period, a specific, rather narrow, set of image types were promoted to the status of coin obverses. This move resembled, indeed partly mimicked, the restricted set of images employed on religious icons of the same period.

Arguably the novel types that began to appear on the obverses of Byzantine coinages, standing or enthroned Emperors and the like, owed much to oriental prototypes. Although the evidence is open to debate, there is one image that appears in later medieval times, that of the mounted ruler, which seems surely to owe something to oriental inspiration. I hope in this note to begin to untangle its story.

The obverse image of the king as horseman in the ancient world was most prominently displayed on the drachms and tetradrachms of the Indo-Scythian and Indo-Parthian rulers Azes and Gondophares. These kings were originally of nomadic stock from the Scythian steppes. They ruled over the sedentary populations of NW India in the 1st century BC. In image they were (1) represented to their subjects as mounted warriors on the millions upon millions of coins they issued.

This tradition of presenting nomadic rulers, or their progeny, as mounted warriors to the largely sedentary subject populations in Afghanistan and North West India dominated coin issue for the next millenium. Issues of Zabul (2) around the 7th century, of the Shahis around the 8th century, and the Ghorids (3) in the late 12th century, all seem to continue this self same tradition.

The Ghorids of course were not the first medieval Moslem dynasty to rule and strike coins in India. The Ghaznavids had preceded them by nearly two centuries, but within the strict iconoclastic orthodoxy of the 11th century Ghaznavids apparently quenched any desire they may have had to launch a new figured type. Just the same seems to have been true of the conquests in the Middle and Near East around 1040 by the nomadic Seljuqs. It was not until the Seljuqs began to strike coin in the former Byzantine territories of Asia Minor that figured types began to appear, around the mid 12th century. When they did appear however, it was the horseman type that dominated on their copper issues, and even spread occasionally onto their silver. The appearance of the horseman figure on Seljuq coinage seems to just pre-date its appearance on Ghorid billon, or maybe to be contemporary with it. Thus neither seems to have inspired the other, and most likely both looked back to some earlier common source in seeking out their dynastic logos.

When we turn from Moslem realms to the Christian buffer states of the Near East, we find that Armenia (5) almost certainly adopted its horseman type from Seljuq models. Most likely Trebizond (6) later did something similar in turn. However the Near East was not the only zone where horsemen coinages came into vogue in the 12th century. Nor was it the only area where Christendom was defending its borders against horsemen of nomadic origin in the 12th century. Far to the West, in Spain, the reconquista brought the extended state of Portugal into being. Almost simultaneously with the Seljuqs and Ghorids, Portugal too began to strike the horseman type (7), this time on its gold issues. And that is not all. Far to the North, Eastern Germany too had experienced centuries of warfare with armies of nomadic horsemen, including Huns, Slavs, Avars, Magyars, and Bulgars. The early bracteate silver coinage of the 12th century North East Europe took many diverse types, but the horseman was as prominent as any, and apparently appears well before any of the Ghorid, Seljuq or Portuguese examples.

What are we to make of this pattern we have begun to trace here? Clearly the near simultaneous appearance of horsemen types in the 12th century, in four different zones, could be just coincidence. But the only way to justify such a conclusion is to first discredit all the alternatives. (I am often saddened by how readily the cry of 'co-incidence' goes up, regarding all manner of such puzzling subjects, without any inquiry being made into the alternatives. It seems to me to be an eristic or lazy ploy of argument).

In my opinion there is a single driving force behind these four disparate events. What this was will become clear if we press on and track the subsequent development of the horseman type in later centuries.

The subsequent appearance of horsemen types in Russia (9) and Lithuania (10) seems to me to likely be some sort of corollary of the use of the type in Eastern Germany. As Christendom drove its borders further East, Christian rulers merely followed the pre existing precedents. Likewise, a series of rather ephemeral horseman issues further South, in Serbia (11), (also Bulgaria, Cyprus and Byzantium but these not illustrated) might likewise be loosely related to a westward retreat of Christendom before the growing Turkish threat.

However, in Hainault, a new type of horseman obverse coinage appears in the mid 13th century. Remote from all but the most intrepid nomadic raiders, on the shores of the North Sea the circumstances of its appearance suggest that there was some novel departure here. Launched as a new high denomination silver issue, and valued at a double sterling, the coin was also almost exactly equivalent in value to the contemporary Armenian tram. Coupling this to the background of the issuer, Margaret of Constantinople, (12), the grounds on which the case for an Eastern pedigree for this piece could be based begin to emerge.

These Low Countries silver 'cavalier' established what seems to be an important new precedent with regard to horseman issues in Europe. The 13th century saw the debasement and destruction of the early penny or denier denominations and the erection, in their stead, of higher weight pure silver 'gros'. In the 14th century we see the circulation of these self same silver gros being themselves undermined by the launch of even higher denomination coins, this time in gold. Prominent amongst such issues in the Low Countries were the issue of gold *francs a cheval* (13). Similar moves seem to be afoot in Spain (14), Scotland (not shown) and elsewhere.

The 13th and 14th century use of the horseman image in NW Europe seems to be intimately connected with this. The process of racking up denomination values seems in turn to have gone hand in hand with the destruction of markets, and with the rise to power of an ever more narrow and powerful aristocratic elite.

The final twist to this tale of the horsemen type in Medieval Europe concerns events at the close of the 15th century. The celebrated cultural renaissance of that time was accompanied by a less well known, but equally influential economic renaissance. Again a wide range of silver coins, and eventually copper coinages too, began to accompany the gold. In the 15th century the Holy Roman emperor claimed the exclusive right to regulate the issue of gold coinage, and it was as a form of protest to that particular form of monopolistic control that the guldengroschen or silver crown was first struck.

The very first such crown was struck in the county of Tirol in 1486, (15), and it carried on it a bold horseman design. Subsequent issues, such as those of Hungary (16), and England (17), both chose in their turn to replicate this move, as did some of the other crown issuing states elsewhere in Europe. Thus after dignifying the destructive racking up of denominations in the 13th and 14th centuries, the horseman logo appears to swop sides in the 15th century, and thenceforward to associate with matters to do with the deregulation of markets, as the circle of wealth begins to expand to include the lesser aristocracy, and even some of the rest.

The Inner Meaning of the Horseman Type

It must be stressed that mounted kingly images have a long pedigree outside coinage. An imperial statue of Charlemagne on horseback still exists, and was cast four centuries before such images were widely used on coin. English monarchs too began to use mounted images on their personal seals five centuries or more before they appeared thus on English coins. The derivative account of the relationship between the coin types given above seems to me to hold water even in the face of these observations, but I would be pleased to hear from any who feel the urge to argue that an alternative account of matters would be more accurate.

To recap we seem to have isolated three separate uses for the horseman logo on medieval coinage. Firstly, it was used as a badge by peoples of nomadic descent. Secondly, as the logo of Christian states who found themselves in conflict with those nomadic empires, and who adopted some aspects of the nomadic craft of mounted warfare. Thirdly, the horseman type seems to have become a device associated with the launch of new high value coinages in precious metals.

I propose in the rest of this text to seek out an underlying interpretation of the meaning of this logo - one that unifies all three of these apparently separate forms of use. In order to do this I must first introduce a rather special sort of story or idea - what I shall call here a 'fundamental tribal myth'. To see a well known example of such a fundamental tribal myth, consider the very ancient idea that human society as a whole can be viewed as constituting a leviathan or 'great man'. We can find traces of this myth in the preserved fragments of the pre-historic oral traditions of both Europe and India, and thenceforward the idea crops up repeatedly in ancient, medieval and modern political writings worldwide. This great man myth was used to implant the idea that society should be governed by the intellect of priests or kings, analogous to the way in which reason, or the head, governs the actions of the body. Likewise the army was responsible for the physical enforcement of government edicts, just

as the arms carry out the intentions generated in the head. The residual subject population seems generally to be relegated to the zone of the feet, although a common Malthusian twist to the scenario tends rather to associate them with the genitals. It can be readily seen how this pre-historic myth might be used as a form of propaganda to reinforce the grip of an authoritarian elite over the population as a whole.

It appears that the coming of coins more or less coincided with a great intellectual awakening around the 6th to 5th century BC in Europe, India & China. Free thought and free markets went hand in hand in beating back the sort of tribal hierarchical social structures that had been sustained on the back of the great man myth and other such insidious propaganda. The triumph of the open society, in so far there can be said to have been a triumph, was rather short lived. Within a couple of generations we find a surge of reactionary philosophical activity seeking to re-discover or re-invent paternalistic and hierarchical mythologies, thereby to restore the rights and privileges of a dominant elite.

Actually the efforts of these reactionary philosophers were not very impressive. Plato's stab at resurrecting a fundamental myth, his so called 'myth of the metals', suggested that elites are self selecting, having been born with golden souls. We do not need to go out of our way criticize this thesis, since Plato himself admitted this was bunk. Aristotle's effort was to suggest that human society should model itself on that of the bees. This became a popular standby for many later political theorists. Serious drawbacks to it would seem to include the fact that human beings are not bees, and also, how do we know that the bees are having such a fun time anyhow? More successful were attempts, both in Ancient China and in Rome, to propagate the notion that human society resembled a shepherd and his flock of sheep. This at least has the merit of stressing the positive aspects of paternalism.

Running side by side with this search for a satisfactory hierarchical mythology ran a straightforward admiration for the surviving tribal societies. In the 5th century BC, relatively open societies with coins and an individualistic culture were thin on the ground. Plato only had to peer over the fence into the next parish to find a model of traditional tribal society in Sparta. He did not spare ink in praise of it. When the tribal reconquista began in earnest however, it was led by more peripheral states than Sparta: Chin in China, Magadha in India, Macedonia in Greece.

Traces of this regard for the vigor and purity of tribal society loom large in the writings of a host of subsequent scholars. For instance, in the 19th century we find that paragon of authoritarian propaganda, Marx, curiously fixated by the rather minor events concerning land struggles within the small relic tribal society of Western Scotland. There can be little doubt that the brief eulogy to German tribal purity found in Tacitus lay close to the root of the dark shadows that fell over mid 20th century Europe. At the present day, fixations with shamanistic ideologies saturate some sections of popular culture. In the 21st century, we might yet live to see sour fruits of Ibn Khaldun's paean to the virtues of the desert Arabs.

It is within the context of such intellectual admiration for tribal hierarchy and its fundamental mythologies that we can profitably study the medieval horseman logo. In so far as Europe has flown the flag of free thought and free markets over the centuries (and admittedly it has often been flown at half mast only), it been flown in the face of assault from mounted nomadic horsemen. Persia, India and China have all been devastated by successive hordes of Huns, Arabs, Turks and Mongols. In so far as it had been spared, geography alone has been Europe's saviour. Nor have the local problems arising

from Slav, Magyar and Bulgar incursions been minor affairs. Even that most central of all European states, Burgundy, managed in the early tenth century to get itself severely mauled successively by Magyar, Arab and (mounted) Viking forces. The vigor and group solidarity of these hierarchical tribalistic societies undoubtedly posed major threats to the external security of Europe. For the very self same reasons they represented an ideal and readily accessible model for those seeking a new hierarchical myth upon which to build their internal political propaganda.

The ancient regime in England was abruptly terminated on the 30th January 1649 with the beheading of Charles I. Many would date the modern era from this date. The shock waves from it broke in the 18th century in France, and, at a remove, in 20th century Russia. The defeated forces of King Charles were the 'cavaliers', the horsemen. The modern world only began when the horsemen had been defeated.

Cromwell of course won the war, but as is well known he lost the peace, and it was in no small part through this act of beheading the king. Forever after cavaliers have generally been popularly represented as jolly, fun loving types. Chivalry itself is synonymous with purity and integrity. Nostalgia, handled with genius by such as Cervantes (Don Quixote) and Carroll (The White Knight) reinforced further aspects of this positive image. Much later Hollywood settled upon John Wayne to echo some of these virtues, played out in its own parallel universe of the imagination.

An earlier, alternative view of the horseman, the destructive beast from Hell, was vouchsafed for European culture largely by the Jewish traditions preserved in the Book of Revelation. War, famine and pestilence also took the horseman as their logo. In later Hollywood epics, we find Clint Eastwood laboring throughout much of his career to bring a sort of balance to the nature of the popular image of the horseman, at least to the silver screen.

If we now turn back to the medieval opinions and mythology of the nomad horsemen themselves, and dismiss the subsequent popular imagery, it is difficult to avoid reinforcing negative aspects of that culture. Consider for instance the traditional term for a peasant, 'ryot', employed by the foreign elites both in Turkey, and India under successive Turkish, Mongol (and British) administrations.

This term 'ryot', originally 'ra'iyat', means a herd of whatever animal provides subsistence. Thus camels in the desert, cattle on pasture, peasants on arable land. Surely it is impossible to read this without thinking back to Plato's comments about the need of the governing class of any ideal state to show the 'right sort of disdain' towards the masses? Plato is in fact not at all shy of using the term 'human cattle' himself. The attitudes of the ruling nomadic horsemen towards their sedentary subjects thus exactly mirrors the ideal that Plato had previously preached.

The philosophical and political realities of the aristocracies of nomadic extraction mirror just what we have read in their etymology. Bosworth ('The Ghaznavids' p. 50 ff), quotes the 10th century historian Baihaqi thus: 'the King must be commanding, masterful and overbearing. The subject population must be in complete fear and trembling of the king and his army'. Even Baihaqi however had no stomach for the extent to which this self same advice was applied by his own master. He writes that contemporary efforts to extract tax from the population of Amul by Sultan Mas'ud had turned 'paradise into hell'.

If we dig deeper still into the lore of the nomadic horsemen, we find a very odd story recounted by Heroditus, concerning the Scyths. This story explains how the Scyths had once been long detained in a

foreign war. In their absence, their slaves had interbred with their wives. A generation of slave progeny had grown up, and eventually occupied the vacant lands as their own. When the Scyth returned, they tried to defeat their former slaves, and to recapture their wives and lands. At first they failed in their attempts. Their fortunes were not reversed until one of them came up with the following novel plan. The Scyths, he suggested, should cease the attempt to fight on equal terms. They should throw aside their spears and bows. Instead they would ride at their former slaves just armed with horse whips. According to the account, when the plan was tried, every man that faced them immediately forgot he was a soldier, and fled the field.

Read as history this is clearly absurd nonsense. Read as a hierarchical myth, it is masterly. At its heart is the suggestion not just that the Scythians were superior to their slaves, but that the superiority was of a totally transcendental nature. They were better than their slaves, but not for any empirical reason what so ever. They just were better. The point of the story is to convey the notion that the superiority of the Scyths over their slaves did not arise from this world, it preceded it.

Thus within the oral traditions of ancient nomadic culture we find exactly the sort of fundamental myth that Plato and his followers seek. In medieval Europe we find just such a myth ridden, hierarchical closed society being re-created. Behind the ideals of chivalric purity we find the concept of a dominant, horse borne elite playing a significant role in reinforcing ideas of social inequality. In the repeated use of the horseman logo at the launch of high denomination coinages, we find the appeal to the 'superior metal' which the proposed customers for these coins thought of as being an integral part of their own character, by birthright.

It is not clear what part the pre-historic Scythian myth of the whips directly played in underpinning subsequent horseman propaganda. It seems that it likely played some. It is possibly significant that a sizeable proportion of the Indo-Scythian coins of Azes show the mounted king holding a whip. It is amusing to play with the idea that this happened in the only province of the Greek world that I know of that has ever had a king called 'Plato' ruling over it (Tapsell 195/12, MA 1742). It is only in a sense of playfulness however that I remark that on first ruling over his Indian subjects Azes is portrayed to them on his coinage armed with a spear, and only later does he abandon it for a whip!

More significant still is the fact that when the English traveler Fletcher visited Russia in the late 16th century, he reports hearing an explanation for the horseman image appearing on the contemporary coinage, which is taken straight from the page of Heroditus. Fletcher seems to have had before him a Moscow denga, and took the horseman's saber shown on them for a whip. The account he relates however follows Heroditus in every detail, save for the facts that the scene of the action is now removed to Novgorod, the Scyths (Slavs) are now the slaves, and it is the Russian gentlemen that prevail.

I guess about 20 years have passed since I began to puzzle about the significance of the horseman image on medieval coinage. Recent chance finds in diverse writings of Chernetsov and Schama rekindled my interest in the topic, so at last I have taken the stew out of the freezer and dished it up. The central quest I had 20 years back was to find the link, if such existed, between the horseman images on ancient Scythian coins, and those of the early modern English Stuart kings. I now think there is a link of sorts, that can be tenuously traced through the pedigree of numismatic iconography. Associated with this numismatic link, and underpinning it, lies a shared approach to the creation of

political propaganda. In pre-historic Scythia, and in Stuart England we find that a similarly bare faced rejection of rationality lies at the root of the will to power. The use of the horseman type on English coins is chronologically tied exactly to the period of ascendancy of the political philosophy called 'The divine right of kings'. Recall for a moment the transcendental nature of the Scythian claim to hierarchical superiority. Then read the following extract from J N Figgis, reviewing the Philosophy of Divine Right in 1896 (p. 256):

(The theory of the Divine Right of Kings)..... was able to gain currency by appealing to some of the deepest instincts of human nature. It gathered up into itself notions of the sanctity of the medicine man, of the priestly character of primitive royalty.

Surely the most famous intellectual to apply himself to defending this political philosophy was the king himself, James I of England. The Scythians had held that racial superiority existed independent of skill at arms. In his book the 'True Law of Free Monarchies' we find James arguing that kingly superiority existed independent of rational justification:

That which concerns the mystery of the king's power is not lawfully to be disputed, for that is.....to take away the mystical reverence that belongs unto them that sit on the throne of God.