

## THE ROLE OF TRANSPORT ANIMALS AND VEHICLES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF MILITARY AFFAIRS IN CENTRAL ASIA

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**Abstract:** The article examines the history, role, and importance of transport animals and vehicles in the development of military affairs in Central Asia.

**Keywords:** Central Asia, Herodotus, military art, camel, horse, wheeled transport, Stone Age, Bronze Age, Oltintepa, Andronovo culture, ancient Bactria, ancient Khwarezm, fortifications, Varakhsha, *Avesta*, wings.

### Introduction

Transport animals and vehicles played a crucial role in the formation and development of military art among the peoples of Central Asia. Therefore, it is necessary to consider the emergence and spread of camels, horses, and wheeled transport. Beginning from the Late Stone Age, land-based means of movement started to appear in Central Asia. The domestication of animals such as horses, camels, and donkeys—especially from the Eneolithic and Bronze Age onward—led to their widespread use as primary means of transport. From the developed Bronze Age, horse breeding and camel breeding emerged as separate branches of agriculture, and regions and tribes specializing in raising these animals began to form. This specialization and lifestyle remained largely unchanged until the early twentieth century.

### Main Part

Among ancient transport animals, camels held particular importance due to their strength, endurance, and capacity to carry heavy loads. This led to their partial sacralization as highly valued transport animals. Archaeological research shows that camels were widely used in the region from the Bronze Age onward. Steppe tribes of the Andronovo culture may have been among the first to domesticate the two-humped Bactrian camel [1]. Finds from the Oltintepa site in southern Turkmenistan—including camel bones and a clay figurine of a camel harnessed to a cart—confirm that camels were also used as transport in sedentary agricultural centers.

Clay camel figurines discovered at Yerqo'rg'on and nearby sites, depictions on seals and coins of ancient Bactria and on Afrighid-period Khwarezm coins, images of winged camels in the ruler's palace at Varakhsha, and a throne shaped like a two-humped camel all demonstrate both the widespread distribution of camels and their elevation to state symbolism. In addition, the crowns of Afrighid rulers were adorned with camel imagery. These facts indicate not only the geographic spread of camels but also their symbolic significance. In Uzbek mythology, camels represent strength, prosperity, and victory, while in the *Avesta* ("Bahram Yasht"), the deity of fortune and victory, Verethragna, is depicted in the form of a camel [2].

In Central Asia, two types of camels were traditionally bred: the single-humped dromedary (fast-running pack camel) and the two-humped Bactrian camel (shorter and stronger). Through crossbreeding, large and resilient hybrid camels—called *nortuya* by Uzbeks and Kazakhs and *iner* by Turkmens—were developed. In general, long-term breeding resulted in seven types of hybrid camels and three types of Bactrian camels. These hybrids could carry 16–20 poods, travel 30–35 km per day with loads, and up to 60 km without loads [3].

When ancient Central Asian states sent envoys to neighboring countries, camels were often included among the diplomatic gifts. This practice became especially widespread in relations with China, where high-quality camels were frequently presented by states such as Kangju and the Hephthalites, as well as by individual regions such as Maymurgu.

The domestication of the horse marked a major turning point in human civilization. From the Bronze Age onward, horses played a central role in socio-economic life and became the main military transport. Evidence suggests that horses were first domesticated by Eurasian steppe tribes around the 4th millennium BCE and spread widely across the region by the 3rd millennium BCE. Archaeological findings from many Bronze Age sites in Central Asia confirm the presence of horses.

Initially, horses were used mainly by elites or in ceremonial contexts. However, findings from ancient Bactrian sites and other regions indicate that by the Early Iron Age, their use had become widespread. Horses were also regarded as sacred animals, as reflected in artistic and craft traditions [4].

Bronze mirrors depicting horses have been found in burial mounds belonging to pastoral tribes (Tagisken, Jolsoy, etc.). Rock art across Kazakhstan, Altai, southern Siberia, the Zarafshan and Nurota mountain ranges, and along the upper reaches of the Naryn River also depicts horses. From the mid-first millennium BCE, the cult of horse deities became widespread in Europe [5]. All these data confirm the economic, cultural, and spiritual importance of horses in ancient societies. Causing harm to or stealing a horse was considered a serious crime and punished severely.

Thus, from the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages onward, domesticated horses spread widely across the region. They played a key role in the development of nomadic pastoralism. The increasing military and political importance of horses, as well as strong demand from neighboring regions, likely stimulated the development of horse breeding in Central Asia [6].

The *Avesta*, with a history of approximately 2,700 years, also provides valuable insight. In the *Mehr Yasht*, dedicated to Mithra, warriors are portrayed as brave and loyal, reflecting the military ideals of the time. Mithra is described as riding a chariot drawn by white horses, fighting for justice against evil forces. The text also describes organized armies divided into central and flanking units, engaging in battle formations and preliminary single combat between champions [7].

These accounts indicate that by the late second millennium BCE, Bactrians, Sogdians, Khwarezmians, Parthians, and Fergana inhabitants fought on horseback. Classical sources also provide information about the Massagetae and Saka.

### Literature Review

The 5th-century BCE Greek historian Herodotus described the Massagetae as follows: “They are both cavalry and infantry (possessing both types of troops), and they are archers and spearmen. They usually carry battle-axes. Their weapons are made of bronze, while their belts and girdles are adorned with gold. They cover their horses’ chests with bronze armor and decorate bridles and fittings with gold” [8].

According to Herodotus, the Saka were similarly equipped with bows, short swords, and double-edged battle-axes. Nomadic steppe peoples developed specialized weapons suited for cavalry warfare. While they excelled in mounted combat, they were also influenced by the military traditions of settled populations that relied on infantry.

At Khumbuztepa (6<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE), east of Hazorasp, an image of a heavily armored cavalryman was discovered. The rider wears lamellar armor reaching the knees, and the horse is also armored. A spear is depicted at the rider’s side.

Central Asia also bred specialized horse types suitable for both light and heavy cavalry. Scholars suggest that selective breeding began as early as the 2nd millennium BCE and achieved results by the early centuries of the 1st millennium BCE. Fast horses were particularly bred in Media and Central Asia, where cavalry replaced chariots as the main military force.

### Conclusion

At the beginning of the Bronze Age, or perhaps earlier, one of the most important inventions in human history—the wheel—emerged. This innovation laid the foundation for technological progress and led to the development of wheeled vehicles such as carts and wagons adapted to specific geographic conditions.

The use of wheeled transport significantly influenced the development of communication routes. It created the need for roads suitable for carts, which were likely first constructed within cities and their surrounding economic zones. These developments reflect a certain level of socio-economic organization, including trade, craftsmanship, and the production of transport equipment.

Since building roads—especially those suitable for wheeled transport—required considerable labor and resources, early road systems were limited in scope. They mainly connected cities and major economic centers with nearby resource areas and agricultural lands.

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