

The story of the grateful wolf and Venetic horses in Strabo's Geography

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Strabo (the Greek historian and geographer of the Augustan Age) reported that the sanctuary of the Greek hero Diomedes, to whom the ancient Veneti used to sacrifice a white horse, was located in the area of the sacred site at the Timavus River where it flows into the Adriatic. In this passage Strabo also narrated the (aetiological) story of a wolf, which had been saved from the nets of hunters by a well-to-do man. As an act of gratitude, the wolf (which may be regarded as a prototype of a figure corresponding to the Master of the Wolves) drove off a herd of unbranded horses and brought them to the stable of his benefactor. These horses proved to be a superior breed, and indeed the Venetic horses were well known in the Graeco-Roman world as excellent racing horses; horse-breeding and trade in horses were two important economic activities among the Veneti. Strabo's data are confirmed by other literary sources, as well as by archaeological and epigraphic finds.

The story

One of the first more detailed descriptions of the Venetic regions is preserved in *Strabo's Geography*. Strabo from Amaseia, the capital of the former kingdom of Pontus in Asia Minor, which came under partial Roman rule under Pompey the Great, was an important Greek historian and geographer of the Augustan Age.¹ His historical work, titled *Historical Sketches*, is lost and only his *Geography* in 17 books is preserved, in which the Roman Empire and even regions beyond are described in considerable detail. These books also contain very valuable data that Strabo took from earlier historians, geographers, and philosophers, most of whose works are lost. They are of great significance not only for the Greek-speaking parts of the Empire, but also for Italy and the western provinces.² Italy is described mainly in books V and VI.

The ancient Veneti were settled in northeastern Italy and along some of the upper Adriatic regions, which Livy, who was himself from Patavium (present-day Padova), called their "corner" (*Venetorum angulus*).³ In these lands, prior to the arrival of the Carni, they had been the only inhabitants. Ateste (present-day Este) and Patavium were two of their major centres,⁴ and Opitergium (present-day Oderzo) was also important, while Aquileia was founded outside their territory. Tergeste, too, may have never belonged to the

¹ DUECK 2000.

² KOLOSSOURGIA 2005; ENGELS 1999.

³ V 33, 9–11.

⁴ FOGOLARI, PROSDOCIMI 1988; VENETI 2003.



Fig. 1: Map showing peoples and places mentioned in the text (computer graphics: Mateja Belak).

Veneti. It was first mentioned by Strabo as a village belonging to the Carni;⁵ it may have been situated on the territory of the Histri earlier. The Veneti played important economic, and consequently political and cultural roles even outside their territory in northeastern Italy, as is proven most of all by the 'Venetic' inscriptions found in present-day Austrian Carinthia and Slovenia, in particular in the Soča/Isonzo valley, where Tolmin and somewhat later Most na Soči (Sv. Lucija/Santa Lucia) must have been two of the significant pre-historic settlements of a population closely related to the Veneti (Fig. 1).⁶ These tribes had close contacts with northeastern Italy, southern Carinthia, and the Bohinj region.⁷ The Veneti must have influenced more or less the entire northern Adriatic and eastern Alpine areas, and it is not surprising that, according to Ammianus Marcellinus, the Julian Alps were called Venetic before the Augustan conquest (*quas Venetas appellabat antiquitas*).⁸

The story of the grateful wolf is taken from the passage in which Strabo described the worship of the Greek hero Diomedes among the Veneti, adding that there were sacred groves of the Argive Hera and Aetolian Artemis in the near vicinity of the sanctuary. The sanctuary of Diomedes and the groves of both Greek goddesses are located by Strabo in the area of the sacred site at the Timavus River where it flows into the Adriatic. The story

⁵ Strabo, VII 5. 2 C 314; BANDELLI 2001.

⁶ ISTENIČ 1985. A bronze vessel from grave 14 in Idrija at Bača (1st c. BC), with the inscription in the Venetic script (*Laivnai Vrotai*), Vrota perhaps being the name of a goddess (from: ZAKLADI 1999, 178); a bronze tablet from grave 7/8 in Idrija at Bača (1st c. BC), bearing the names *Luks Mel(i)nks* and *Gaijos* (from: ZAKLADI 1999, 179).

⁷ GABROVEC 1987, particularly 149–150; TERŽAN 2002; TERŽAN, LO SCHIAVO, TRAMPUŽ-OREL 1984, 1985; SVOLJŠAK 2001. Much archaeological material has not yet been published to date.

⁸ Amm. Marcel., 31. 16. 7.

of the wolf directly continues the reference to the sacred groves and reads in translation as follows:⁹

“But some mythical elements, of course, have been added: namely, that in these sacred precincts the wild animals become tame, and deer herd with wolves, and they allow the people to approach and caress them, and any that are being pursued by dogs are no longer pursued when they have taken refuge here. And it is said that one of the prominent men, who was known for his fondness for giving bail for people and was twitted for this, fell in with some hunters who had a wolf in their nets, and, upon their saying in jest that if he would give bail for the wolf, and agree to settle all the damage the wolf should do, they would set the wolf free from the toils, he agreed to the proposal; and the wolf, when set free, drove off a considerable herd of unbranded horses and brought them to the stable of the man who was fond of giving bail; and the man who received the favour not only branded all the mares with a wolf, but also called them the “wolf-breed” – mares exceptional for speed rather than beauty; and his successors kept not only the brand but also the name for the breed of the horses, and made it a custom not to sell a mare to outsiders, in order that the genuine breed might remain in their family alone, since horses of that breed had become famous. But, at the present time, as I was saying, the practice of horse-breeding has wholly disappeared.”

The story opens some interesting and intriguing themes: such as the Greek influence in the northern Adriatic among the Veneti, which must have been in one way or another related to the ancient sacred site at the Timavus River. Then the existence of a supposedly common social institution of becoming pledge for somebody, and further the horse-breeding of the Veneti, and the figure of the grateful wolf, the key figure in explaining this aetiological story. Let us first briefly examine the presence of Diomedes and Antenor in Venetia.

Diomedes and Antenor among the Veneti

Two Greek legends are connected with the Ventic area, the stories of Diomedes and Antenor. It is not possible to say which of them is earlier, and possibly they were contemporaneous. Interestingly, both are related to the Venetic horses. Diomedes' identity was double: he was the king of Argos in the epic poetry concerning the Trojan War and Thebes, but he was also a Thracian king according to the stories related to Hercules. Furthermore, some mythical parallels in the reconstructed early Slavic story about Jarilo/St George indicate that Diomedes may have originally been some early Indo-European fertility deity.¹⁰ According to Homer he was one of the most courageous heroes in the Trojan War.

Diomedes had to leave Argos because of the infidelity of his wife and her plotting against him. He was worshipped on both Adriatic coasts, particularly in Apulia where he was kindly received by the king of the Daunians, Daunus. His cult is also attested in Corcyra (present-day Corfu), where he killed a dragon and helped the inhabitants of the island in the war against the Brundisians.¹¹ Two sanctuaries of Diomedes have recently been discovered along the eastern Adriatic coast: the sanctuary on the island of Vela Palagruža,

⁹ V 1. 9 C 215. The translation is taken from: JONES 1949, p. 321.

¹⁰ KATIČIĆ 1994–1995.

¹¹ KATIČIĆ 1989, 72–74 (= *Illyricum*, 1995, 380–381).

the site of the first station for navigators sailing to the north past the promontory of Garganus Mons (Gargano) in the direction of Issa (present-day Vis), as well as for those who sailed from Corcyra towards Spina and Atria.¹² The second stop for the sailors heading north was the Promontory of Diomedes (*Promunturium Diomedis*, present-day Rt Ploča) on the Hyllian Peninsula (*Hyllica peninsula*) south of Šibenik, where another sanctuary of Diomedes was recently identified and excavated.¹³ One of the most famous sanctuaries of Diomedes was among the Veneti at the sacred site of the broad region of Fons/Lacus Timavi, where the Timavus (present-day Timavo/Timava) riemerges and then empties with seven streams into the sea,¹⁴ and where the river god himself was worshipped.¹⁵

According to a different tradition, Antenor would have led the 'Heneti' from Troy to Venetia. There, as is reported by Livy, he would have founded a kingdom after he had defeated the Euganeans. Strangely, Livy does not mention that Antenor was said to have founded his native town of Patavium, which is known from other sources to have been Antenor's foundation.¹⁶ Perhaps the Veneti accepted the cult of Antenor because the Greek lyric poet Pindar of the fifth century BC presented the Antenoridae as horse-driving or horse-riding heroes.¹⁷ In the late Roman Republic and afterwards, during the imperial period, however, it was politically important to be of Trojan descent just like Rome, which allegedly would have been founded by Aeneas. Both Aeneas and Antenor were viewed positively and not as traitors and fugitives, and even the Aquileians are referred to as the Antenoridae, the descendants of Antenor.¹⁸ Strabo, too, knew of the Paphlagonian origin of the Veneti and their arrival in Venetia with Antenor. Most interestingly, he noted that one of the proofs for this thesis is the horse-breeding of the Veneti.¹⁹ Homer might have alluded to this activity when he mentioned a breed of tough mules originating in the country of the Veneti (*Iliad*, II 852). However, horse-breeding in Venetia was more closely linked to Diomedes.

When describing the sacred site of the Timavus River, Strabo cited as his sources the Greek historian Polybius (second century BC) and the Greek philosopher and historian Posidonius (second to first century BC). The position of Diomedes' sanctuary near the sea indicates that one of his roles was the familiar Adriatic role of protecting seafarers, since this was, as has been noted above, one of the main characteristics of the cult of Diomedes in the eastern Adriatic. Indeed Strabo mentions that Diomedes' sanctuary possessed a harbour. However, as could be inferred from Strabo, an indigenous deity must have also influenced his cult. It seems that Diomedes was related to the breeding of horses among the Veneti, who used to sacrifice a white horse to him as late as the time of Strabo's source for this passage.²⁰ This source may have been writers other than Polybius and Posidonius, as is indicated by his citing anonymous sources: "they say". It has been hypothesized that these were Artemidorus of Ephesus, the Greek geographer from the end of the second

¹² KIRIGIN, ČAČE 1998; COLONNA 1998.

¹³ BILIĆ DUJMUŠIĆ 2002.

¹⁴ V 1. 8 C 214.

¹⁵ CUSCITO et al. 1989; VEDALDI IASBEZ 1994, 160–177, 180–181; FONTANA 1997, 30 ff.

¹⁶ *Ab urbe condita*, 1. 1. See, on Antenor, also KATIČIĆ 1988 (= *Illyricum*, 1995); BRACCESI 1997².

¹⁷ *Pyth.*, 5. 82–86; cf. CASSOLA 1979 (1994, 281–283).

¹⁸ MORETTI 1980 (= *Epigrafi*, 1990); BOFFO 2000, 118–120.

¹⁹ V 1. 4 C 212.

²⁰ PROSDOCIMI 2001; ID., 2003, 63 ss.

century BC, who had in his turn used Timaeus of Tauromenium in Sicily (fourth to third century BC).²¹ The story of the wolf was ultimately taken from Timaeus, it seems.²²

Diomedes' sanctuary was situated near two important cult places with sacred groves, in which tame and wild animals were living together, deer together with wolves, all behaving docilely, and any animal, pursued by dogs, if taking refuge in these groves was safe. Strabo noted that one of these sacred groves was dedicated to the goddess called by him the Argive Hera, while the other belonged to the goddess called the Aetolian Artemis.²³ The nature of Artemis was polyvalent in the Greek world; however, in view of sacred precincts, where wild animals became tame, there is hardly any doubt that she was regarded as the mistress of wild animals, *pótnia therôn*, the patroness of hunting; no doubt this must have been her main domain in Aetolia.²⁴ Perhaps it was not due to chance that Hera was related to Diomedes' native country of Argos, while Artemis played an important role in the homeland of Diomedes' grandfather Oeneus, Aetolia. Oeneus was the mythical king of Calydon, and the story of the Calydonian boar indeed points to the widespread worship of Artemis in Aetolia. The goddess sent the wild beast because Oeneus had forgotten to sacrifice to her. The Greek influence in the Upper Adriatic area may have been stronger than is usually assumed, particularly from the Hellenistic period onwards; the Greeks who brought the cult of Diomedes to this area, may have also introduced the worship of Hera and Artemis.

These two goddesses, if they had ever indeed been Greek, were soon assimilated with the local cults of Venetic female deities with similar attributes. Characteristic of the Greek Hera, who was originally perhaps an Aegean great goddess, was her connection with royalty on the one hand, and marriage on the other. Her marriage to Zeus symbolized the natural world of plants and animals and her sanctuaries were often in fertile plains far from towns. She was also the protector of herds, and in that way was also connected with horses. Goddesses of the type of Juno, her Italian/Roman equivalent, were widely worshipped throughout Italy, in particular in northern Italy, where even mother goddesses (Celtic goddesses worshipped in plural) were sometimes called *Iunones*. However, goddesses documented under the name of Juno differed from each other greatly, since they were very much influenced by local female divinities, and were only vaguely similar to the Roman Juno, the patroness of marriage. Even the original role of Juno is not clear, since she was both the goddess of women and a civic deity; the Roman Juno was very much influenced by the Etruscan one (a temple on the Aventine Hill was built for her after her *evocatio* in 396 BC, when she deserted the inhabitants of Veii in the war with Rome).²⁵ Among the Norican Celts, too, a goddess named Juno by the Romans was worshipped, whose statue used to be carried to her sanctuary on a wagon driven by cows. Virgil referred to the custom in his description of the animal plague among the Noricans,²⁶ which caused them to harness aurochs to the carriage because the cows had perished during the epidemics.²⁷

²¹ LASSERRE 1966, 14 ff. See also RADT 2003, 16–19.

²² GUAITOLI 1995; PROSDOCIMI 2001.

²³ V 1. 9 C 215.

²⁴ WERNICKE 1895, 1344.

²⁵ BEARD, NORTH, PRICE 1998, 15–16; 82–83; 133.

²⁶ ŠAŠEL 1980 (= *Opera* 1992).

²⁷ Virgilius, Georg. III 531–533; GRASSL 2007.

The wolf – a prototype of the Master of the Wolves?

It is perhaps interesting (particularly in terms of ethnology and philology) to compare the story of the grateful wolf with other related stories. General observations concerning stories of grateful animals are as follows. Grateful animals are predominantly wild, and only rarely domestic animals. Their stories, which are known all over the Indo-European world since the earliest times and were transmitted orally, differ greatly from each other. The oldest known originate from the Near East. In general, they are about local animals, with the exception of the lion, which is the protagonist of such stories even in countries where it did not live. These stories developed from the motif of a “helpful animal”, which reflects one of the oldest religious beliefs of primitive man. In his world, everything living was regarded as all-powerful and divine. These animals may have been the incarnation of good spirits whom people worshipped because they symbolized moral precepts. Man should behave well towards animals, even if he had to kill them in order to survive.²⁸

Another interesting comparison is with the fables of Aesop, with those in which a wolf is the protagonist. Such stories with speaking animals, illustrating some important truth or moral, are first alluded to by Hesiod (eighth century BC) and must represent an old form of folklore. The wolf always appears as a bad character in these fables. It seems, therefore, that the man in the story was meant to appear as taking a great risk to guarantee for a wild animal that can show no gratitude. The wolf in the Aesopic fables, for example, wanted to harm a fox, proposed a brotherhood with dogs for letting him inside the pen, but then he killed them first; he falsely accused a lamb of troubling the water in a stream from which he wanted to drink, and of doing him other damage that the lamb never had done. There is a story of a heron freeing a bone from a wolf's throat, for which the wolf showed no gratitude to the helpful bird. He further appears as a self-appointed leader of other wolves, passing a law by which he himself did not abide. Or, upon seeing his shadow, which happened to be big, he became conceited and wanted to be the king of the animals, but the lion devoured him. A wolf won the confidence of a shepherd but eventually destroyed his flock. Even wolf cubs, reared with care and love, caused harm to the flock when they grew up, or instinctively behaved like wolves. A wolf disguised himself by putting on a sheepskin and was unintentionally killed by a shepherd for his supper. In three fables the wolf proved to be stupid as he was outwitted by a young goat, by an ass, and by a dog.²⁹

Indeed, even in the corpus of stories about grateful animals, which may have also been in circulation in antiquity, and was collected from various literary sources by August Marx,³⁰ the wolf never appears as a protagonist. Actually, our story has not even been cited in the book (which is no doubt an unintentional omission), and what is also interesting, no story with a wolf is mentioned among the collected stories. Animals known for their gratitude were dolphins, eagles, storks, lions, dogs, horses, elephants, snakes, and some of the smaller animals (e.g. ants and bees). Surprisingly, the majority of these stories have been taken from zoological literature, and classical authors who are often cited are Theophrast, Plutarch, Aelian, and Pliny the Elder.

The fact that the wolf appears in most stories as a hostile, “bad” animal, clearly indicates that to shepherds and stockbreeders wolves have always represented a great danger.

²⁸ LINDAHL 1980.

²⁹ HANDFORD 1964, nos. 26–36; 101, 111, 117.

³⁰ MARX 1889.

They were much feared by villagers who sought to protect themselves and their livestock as best they could against attacks by wolves. The story of a grateful wolf is unique and represents an exception within Graeco-Roman literature, since this animal never appears as grateful figure. Could it nonetheless be explained in a broader context? There is a most interesting figure in European folklore of the Master of the Wolves, very well known among the Slavic peoples, as well as Austrians and Germans, but also among the Finns. This figure could either be a wolf himself, or a forest daemon, although it is often a saint, most commonly either St George or St Martin, but also St Nicholas, St Savo and others. The Master of the Wolves had three main functions: that of commanding the wolves, of allotting food to them, and of protecting livestock and/or people from wolves. According to the beliefs that influenced the stockbreeders' and shepherds' calendar, on the first day of pasturing the Master of the Wolves "shuts the mouths of the wolves" (which may correspond to St George's Day), and on the last day (corresponding perhaps to St. Martin's Day), he "opens them again". This actually signifies two periods of the shepherds' year: outdoor pasture over the late spring, summer and early autumn, and the winter period when the flocks are shut indoor.³¹

Beneath the elaborate folklore and customs related to this belief, the basic need to ward off wolves from the herds is concealed. It could be hypothesized that the grateful wolf in Strabo's story might perhaps have been some kind of a prototype of a figure corresponding in certain ways to the Master of the Wolves: a wolf who could protect a herd of wild horses from other wolves and bring it safe to his benefactor.

The Venetic horses

Strabo's story of the grateful wolf is notably an aetiological story closely connected with the trade in horses among the Veneti. Indeed, horse-breeding was one of their conspicuous economic activities for which they were widely known, as has already been emphasized. Venetic riding-horses are first mentioned in the seventh century BC by the Greek lyric poet Alcman;³² they must have been well known and greatly appreciated, since it is known that during the Olympic Games in 440 BC the "Venetic mares" brought victory to Leon from Sparta, and the Venetic horses are further mentioned by Euripides.³³ The fame of the breed finds direct confirmation also in an earlier passage of Strabo in the same book of his *Geography* (this one, too, based on the Sicilian historian Timaeus). In it Strabo mentioned that Dionysius the Elder of Syracuse (late fourth century BC), the famous Sicilian tyrant, bought his competition horses in Venetia.³⁴ With this passage Strabo wished to illustrate the Paphlagonian origin of the Veneti and refute the hypothesis that they would have been colonists from among the Celts from Gaul with the same name, inhabiting modern Morbihan along the Atlantic ocean. The text reads as follows:³⁵

"Some say that the Heneti too are colonists of those Celti of like name who live on the ocean-coast; while others say that certain of the Heneti of Paphlagonia escaped hither with

³¹ MENCEJ 2001. I owe the reference to this book to Dr. Monika Kropiej and Dr. Andrej Pleterski, who encouraged me to use it for my study.

³² Fr. 1. 1. 50–51.

³³ Polemon, fr. 22; Euripides, *Hippol.* 231; 1131; cf. CASSOLA 1979 (= 1994, 277).

³⁴ V 1. 4 C 212.

³⁵ Translation by JONES 1949, pp. 307–309.

Antenor from the Trojan war, and, as testimony to this, adduce their devotion to the breeding of horses – a devotion which now, indeed, has wholly disappeared, although formerly it was prized among them, from the fact of their ancient rivalry in the matter of producing mares for mule-breeding. Homer, too, recalls this fact: 'From the land of the Heneti, whence the breed of the wild mules.' Again, Dionysius, the tyrant of Sicily, collected his stud of prize-horses from here, and consequently not only did the fame of the Henetian foal-breeding reach the Greeks but the breed itself was held in high esteem by them for a long time."

At Olympia, in the sanctuary of Zeus, Dionysius competed with four-horse chariots during the Olympic games in 388 BC. He distinguished himself by owning such good horses, since the owners of the horses, not the actual drivers or riders, received the glory in these contests. The tyrant did not enjoy a good reputation in Greece, particularly not in Athens, neither as a composer of tragedies (his verses were also recited in the course of the games), nor – even worse – as an ally of Sparta and possibly of the Persians. The Olympic games were for him an occasion of enhancing his reputation and winning more recognition in Greece, therefore he sent to Olympia a festive embassy, led by his brother Thearides. However, on the instigation of the orator Lysias (next in fame to Demosthenes), who publicly exposed his policy as hostile to Greek freedom, his tent was attacked by the spectators.³⁶ Nonetheless, his winning horses became well known and appreciated in Greece for a long time as excellent race-horses. Diodorus of Sicily reported that "*Dionysus sent to the contest several four-horse teams, which were by far superior to all others in swiftness*".³⁷

The period of origin for the breeding of white (?)³⁸ horses among the Veneti cannot be established with certainty. Obviously it was older than the rule of Dionysius the Elder of Syracuse, that is, older than the fourth century BC, but it is not known how much older. Burials of horses in the Iron Age Altino cemetery of "Le Brustolade", for example, are dated from the end of the sixth century BC onwards.³⁹ The breeding of the Venetic horses most probably flourished in the time of the so-called "Situla Art" in Dolenjska (Lower Carniola). Depictions on the decorated bronze buckets and buckles also show horses,⁴⁰ and the question may be asked whether the Veneti exported their horses to their neighbours.⁴¹ Perhaps some horses – no doubt prestigious ones – found in the graves of the Iron Age inhabitants of Dolenjska originated from Venetia.

After having told the story of the grateful wolf, Strabo added that by his time horse-breeding among the Veneti had already become extinct. This is important information from his own lifetime, although this is only a *terminus ante quem*, and it is not possible to conclude when exactly the breeding ceased. By the time when the Roman rule extended over Venetia, however, the export of horses from Italy, quite possibly the Venetic horses, was limited, which means that the breeding of good horses was still very prestigious.

The Romans did not allow the export of these horses, except on special occasions. Such a situation occurred, for example, in 170 BC. A year earlier the consular army under

³⁶ Dionys. Hal., *Lys.* 29 f.

³⁷ Diodorus, 14. 109. 1.

³⁸ Strabo mentioned that the Veneti sacrificed a white horse to Diomedes, see *supra*.

³⁹ GAMBACURTA 2003, 91.

⁴⁰ TURK 2005, *passim*.

⁴¹ The "Venetic" horseman appearing on the Slovenian passports and identity cards is erroneously regarded as a Venetic (and proto-Slovenian) horseman, cf. HROBAT 2007, 6.

Gaius Cassius Longinus caused great damage to the Iapodes, *Alpini populi* (probably the Taurisci inhabiting present-day Slovenia), Histri, and Carni, by devastating their lands and hunting for slaves. This happened after the consul had been recalled by the Senate from his march to Macedonia and had to return.⁴² Longinus had been allotted the province of Cisalpine Gaul (northern Italy) but wanted to win glory and booty in Macedonia in the war against Philip V. Miscalculating the great distance between Aquileia and Pella, the capital of the Macedonian kingdom, he took provisions for 30 days and guides to show him the way across the Balkans. The Senate, who had been informed about this by the Aquileians, made the consul stop his march immediately. Unfortunately it was not possible to prevent the harm done to the peoples through whose territory Longinus and his soldiers were returning.

The representatives of those peoples complained in the Senate about the devastation, and the brother of the Celtic king Cincibilus came to protest on behalf of the Alpine peoples, who were his brother's allies.⁴³ In this delicate situation the Senate sent an embassy of two most distinguished senators to Cincibilus and his brother, with costly gifts including two golden necklaces, five silver vessels, as well as two horses with horse equipment, but most of all the right to import horses since their export was otherwise forbidden.⁴⁴ This privilege was regarded as a great advantage and the horses in question were most probably Venetic horses, reared in the immediate neighbourhood of the Celtic kingdom(s) in the Alps.

In the prehistoric and Roman periods, wild horses as well as aurochs (the wild progenitor of modern cattle) are known to have been living in the Alps; Strabo took these data too from Polybius, who added that along with them an animal of unusual form also inhabited these mountains. Its outward appearance closely resembled that of a stag, except its neck and coat, which were similar to that of a boar. Below the chin the animal had a hard protuberance about a span long, with hairs growing at the end, as thick as the tail of a colt.⁴⁵ This description corresponds well to an elk,⁴⁶ and its existence in the third century BC and also in a later period has been archaeologically confirmed.⁴⁷ The Alps at that time were partly populated by animals different from the present-day ones; some of them became locally extinct, such as here mentioned wild horses, aurochs, and elks.

Interestingly, it is well known from archaeological contexts what a great role horses played among the Veneti, since even horse cemeteries and relatively frequent horse burials have been discovered to date in the area of Patavium (Padua), Altinum (Altino), and Atria (Adria); it has therefore been assumed that commerce in horses must have been highly developed among the Veneti.⁴⁸ The great importance of horses in Venetia seems to be well confirmed also by epigraphy since the Venetic word *ekupetaris*, which occurs in several Venetic inscriptions, indicates a 'master of the horse'. This function may be interpreted either in social or socio-economic terms, in the first case corresponding to the Roman

⁴² Livy, 43. 5. 1 ff.

⁴³ This kingdom may have been the Norican kingdom, although it is not noted in the sources under this name; Livy called Cincibilus the king of the Celts (*rex Gallorum*); DOBESCH 1980; ŠAŠEL KOS 1997.

⁴⁴ Livy, 43. 5. 7–9. See URBAN 2000, 333.

⁴⁵ Polyb. 34.10. 8 = Strabo, IV 6.10 C 207–208.

⁴⁶ ŠAŠEL KOS 1998.

⁴⁷ KRIVIC 1985; it is now known, through 14C dating, that elks lived there around AD 400; JAMNIK 2004, 293. I owe this reference to Dr. Borut Toškan, whom I also thank for a discussion about the (wild) horses.

⁴⁸ See, e.g., BOLOGNESI 1998–1999; RIEDEL 1982; GAMBACURTA 2003, where other literature is cited.

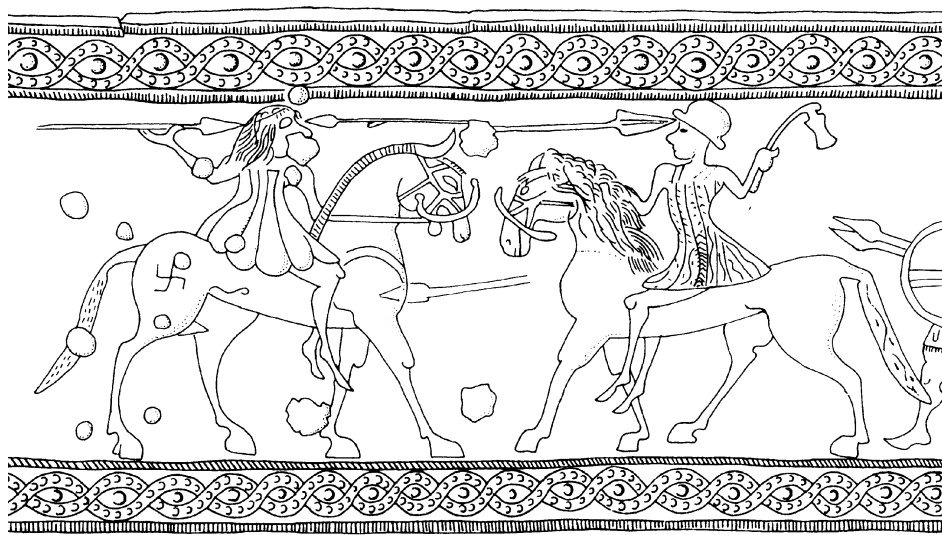


Fig. 2: Bronze belt buckle from Vače (end of 6th to 5th century BC; from: TURK 2005, p. 39 fig. 58).

ordo equester, i.e. a member of the upper class, possessing a horse, and, in the second case, to a breeder of horses.⁴⁹

In general it can be observed that Iron Age horse burials are also not rare in the area bordering the regions inhabited by the Veneti. Thus they are found at Most na Soči, where the Iron Age population was related to the Veneti, as well as in other parts of Slovenia, particularly in the cemeteries belonging to the Dolenjska Iron Age hillforts (Stična, Magdalenska Gora, Libna, Novo Mesto),⁵⁰ but also elsewhere, as for example at Bled, Pristava.⁵¹ Much has been written about the origin of the horses in the northern Adriatic and sub-Alpine regions, and it has been postulated that two groups (types) could be distinguished: the taller and more prestigious eastern group, owned by warriors and members of the ruling class as a status symbol, as well as a smaller group, of western origin, used as working horses.⁵² However, the latest genetic studies of horses seem to indicate that the taming and breeding of horses was much older and much more complex than has hitherto been believed. As Marsha Levine concluded: “The genetic data appears to suggest that as the knowledge of horse breeding spread, additional horses from wild populations were incorporated into the domestic herds, thus forming the regional mtDNA clusters”.⁵³

That would make the historical kernel of the story, preserved by Strabo, at least theoretically plausible. Indeed, on decorated “Situla Art” objects from the early Iron Age horses are depicted in different ways, which has often been noted. Particularly instructive in this respect is the scene on the decorated bronze belt buckle from Vače (end of sixth to fifth century BC) representing two warriors in different attire on different horses

⁴⁹ MARINETTI 2003.

⁵⁰ DULAR 2007.

⁵¹ As yet unpublished; personal communication of Dr. Andrej Pleterski.

⁵² BÖKÖNYI 1993, 25 ff.

⁵³ LEVINE 2006: citation on p. 199. I owe this reference to Dr. Borut Toškan, whom I thank very much for his comments on the horse in archaeology.

(Fig. 2).⁵⁴ The warrior on the left is riding a taller horse with better equipment, bearing the sun symbol of the swastika (indicating the colour white?),⁵⁵ although he seems to be in a losing position. He still holds one spear in his left hand, while the warrior on the right has already discarded both of his and wounded his opponent's horse; he is now holding an axe. The horse on the right is slightly smaller and "wilder" looking, and quite different from the other. Both breeds of horses are attested archaeologically at the Iron Age Dolenjska sites, and the smaller horse is currently regarded as a more or less local type.⁵⁶ The attire and weapons of both horsemen, too, are well documented in the Dolenjska graves. Rather than to assume this represents a duel between "a Thracian and a local Illyrian warrior",⁵⁷ or – much more plausible – between a warrior from Etruria or Venetia and a "Lower Carniolan", the scene may be interpreted as a contest between the "princes" within the same region, or a duel between two heroes from local legends.⁵⁸ Indeed, it does not seem to be entirely clear which of them is the winner. Could it be assumed that one of them, perhaps the warrior on the left, was in possession of a Venetic horse?

The way in which the political incident concerning the misconduct of the army of Gaius Cassius Longinus was handled is most instructive. It shows – among other things – how the breeding of horses must have been important at that time in Italy, and notably also in northern Italy among the Veneti, where such breeding is attested. Indeed this could be confirmed by the data in Strabo's *Geography*, and his story about the grateful wolf. It is most interesting to note that in the second half of the sixteenth century, the autochthonous Karst horse (i.e. originating from the same broad area as the white Venetic horse known from Strabo) was cross-bred with Spanish, Napolitan, and Arab horses to produce a breed of fast (mostly white) horses – the Lipica horses or Lipizzaners – intended for the court of Vienna, the army, and the Spanish riding school.⁵⁹

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⁵⁴ For another drawing of the same buckle see ZAKLADI 1999, 146.

⁵⁵ I would like to thank for this opinion Prof. Andrej Pleterski.

⁵⁶ BÖKÖNYI 1993, 46–47 and fig. 11.

⁵⁷ Summarized by BÖKÖNYI 1993, *ibid.*, citing the explanation of T. G. E. Powell. Neither 'Thracian' nor 'Illyrian' is plausible; along these lines the riders should better be explained as a Scythian and a 'Lower Carniolan'.

⁵⁸ For a short discussion see TURK 2005, 40.

⁵⁹ DOLENC 1980.

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Pripovedka o hvaležnem volku in venetskih konjih v Strabonovi Geografiji

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Grški zgodovinar in geograf iz avgustejskega časa, Strabon, nam je v svojem opisu Italije ohranil zanimivo zgodbo o hvaležnem volku. Postavljena je v kontekst svetih krajev v območju izvira in izliva reke Timave pri Venetih (sl. 1), kjer so v antiki častili boga Timava. Strabon Timava sicer ne omenja, pač pa kult grškega heroja Diomeda, ki je imel v bližini izlivov Timave v Jadransko morje svoje svetišče in ki so mu imeli navado žrtvovati belega konja. Diomeda so častili tako vzdolž zahodne kot vzhodne obale Jadrana in njegena neposrednega zaledja; njemu posvečeno svetišče so odkrili na Veli Palagruži in na Rtu Ploča (*Promunturium Diomedis*) južno od Šibenika, veljal je za zaščitnika pomorcev. Tudi pri Venetih je imel svetišče v neposredni bližini Jadranske obale ter, kot pravi Strabon, blizu svetih gajev argivske Here in etolske Artemide. Diomed je bil kralj Argosa, kamor se je vrnil po padcu Troje, vendar je bilo zaradi ženine nezvestobe in spletk njegovo življenje ogroženo in zateči se je moral na italsko stran Jadrana h kralju Davnije Davnu.

Žrtvovanje belega konja je bilo Strabonu iztočnica za zgodbo o hvaležnem volku, ki ga je nek premožni mož rešil iz zank lovcev. Človek je bil namreč znan po tem, da je bil pripravljen vsakomur iti za poroka, pa so ga lovci v šali povprašali, če bi bil porok tudi volku. Mož je pristal, volk pa mu je v njegovo stajo iz hvaležnosti prignal čredo divjih konj, ki so se izkazali za odlično raso; novi lastnik jim je vtisnil žig s podobo volka.

Zanimivo je, da volk nikdar ne nastopa kot hvaležna žival; motiv hvaležne živali pa je sicer v folklori pogost po vsem indoevropskem svetu in poznan od orientalnih tekstov in antike dalje. Hvaležne živali so predvsem divje, ne domače, in predvsem lokalne, ne eksotične, z izjemo leva, ki nastopa tudi tam, kjer sicer ne živi. Te zgodbe so se razvile iz motiva 'živali, ki pomaga', kar odraža eno najstarejših oblik verovanja primitivnega človeka, ki je v živem svetu okoli sebe povsod občutil navzočnost božanskega. Te živali si je verjetno predstavljal kot utelešenje dobrih duhov in jih častil, ker so simbolizirale moralne nauke. Človek si je živali želel napraviti sebi naklonjene, čeprav jih je moral tudi ubijati, da je lahko preživel.

Zgodba o hvaležnem volku je izjemna v grško-rimski književnosti in tudi sicer nima vzporednic. Če jo želimo umestiti v širši kontekst, se ponuja zanimiva primerjava z motivom 'Gospodarja volkov', ki je dobro znan v evropski folklori, tako v pripovedih slovenskih kot germanskih narodov, pa tudi med Finci. Gospodar volkov je lahko volk, lahko pa je tudi gozdni duh ali svetnik, posebej pogosto npr. sv. Jurij ali sv. Martin, v tej vlogi pa nastopajo tudi sv. Nikolaj, sv. Savo in drugi. Gospodar volkov je imel tri glavne naloge: volkovom je zapovedoval, jim določal hrano in ščitil živino na paši in ljudi pred volkovi. Živinorejci in pastirji so verjeli, da na prvi dan paše na prostem Gospodar volkov »zapre gobce volkov« (kar je povezano z Jurjevimi), na zadnji dan paše »pa jih spet odpre« (kar je bilo povezano s praznikom na sv. Martina). Strabonov volk bi morda utegnil biti nekakšen prototip 'Gospodarja volkov'.

Strabonova zgodba je etnološke narave in želi razložiti nastanek vzreje konj in trgovine s konji pri Venetih, pri katerih je oboje igralo pomembno ekonomsko vlogo. Po reji konj so bili v grškem svetu znani najmanj od 7. stoletja pr. Kr., ko lirski pesnik Alkman prvič omeni venetske konje. Njihov sloves je ščasoma naraščal, omenja jih tudi Evripid in znano je, da so že na olimpijskih igrah leta 440 pr. Kr. 'venetske kobile' prinesle zmago

svojemu lastniku Leonu iz Šparte. Na olimpijskih igrah leta 388 pr. Kr. pa je s svojimi venetskimi konji v tekmi štirivpreg zmagal mogočni sirakuški tiran Dionizij Starejši; Strabon omenja, da so bili konji venetski, Diodor s Sicilije pa pravi: »*Dionizij je poslal na tekmo nekaj četverovpreg, ki so po hitrosti daleč prekašale vse druge*«.

Znano je tudi, da so Rimljani nadzorovali izvoz konj; še v 2. stoletju pr. Kr. jih načeloma niso dovolili izvažati, izjemo so npr. napravili v primeru večjega političnega incidenta leta 171 pr. Kr. Tedaj je namreč rimski konzul Gaj Kasij Longin z območja Akvileje prodiral z vojsko proti Makedoniji, da bi si pridobil slavo v vojni proti makedonskemu kralju, čeprav je dobil v upravljanje severno Italijo (imenovala se je Cisalpinska Galija), kjer bi moral tudi ostati. Senatski odposlanci so ga dohiteli in odpoklicali, konzul pa je na povratku pustošil ozemlje rimskih zaveznikov. Da bi se oddolžil za zločinsko ravnanje Longinove vojske, je rimski senat poslal k oškodovanemu keltskemu kralju odposlanstvo, ki mu je pripeljalo poleg drugih dragocenih daril tudi dva konja s popolno konjsko opremo, kar je veljalo za zelo prestižno darilo. V tistem času je bila Venetija že pod rimsko oblastjo in podarjena konja sta bila verjetno venetska.

Na pomembno vlogo konj med Veneti kažejo številni konjski pokopi, zlasti v območju Patavija (Padove), Altina in Atrije (Adrije), ter naziv *ekupetaris*, ki je pogost na venetskih napisih in pomeni 'gospodarja konjev'. Kako to funkcijo ustrezno razložiti, ni povsem jasno, ker sta možni tako družbena kot družbeno-ekonomska razlaga; po prvi bi oseba s tem nazivom pripadala višjemu družbenemu razredu, ki bi ustrezal rimskemu viteškemu stanu, po drugi pa bi šlo za rejca konj.

Tudi na območju današnje Slovenije so bili odkriti posamezni pokopi konj v železni dobi, ne le v Mostu na Soči, kjer je živel sosednjim Venetom sorodno prebivalstvo, temveč tudi na Pristavi pri Bledu in na Dolenjskem, tako npr. v Stični, Magdalenski Gori, Libni in Novem mestu. Raziskave kažejo, da gre za dve vrsti konj; konje višje in bolj prestižne vzhodne rase, ki so predstavljali statusni simbol, so imeli člani vladajoče elite in bojevniki, medtem ko so za delo uporabljali manjšo raso konj zahodnega porekla. Vendar pa zadnje genetske študije kažejo, da je bila vzreja konj starejša in veliko bolj zapletena, kot so doslej mislili. Vse kaže, da so občasno v domače črede konj vključevali lokalne divje konje, kar bi potrjevalo zgodovinsko jedro Strabonove zgodbe o volku.

Kam na Veneti še izvažali svoje konje poleg Grčije in Sicilije? Zelo verjetno tudi k veljakom železnodobnih gradišč na Dolenjskem in drugod po Sloveniji. Na bronasti pasni sponi s konca 6. oz. iz 5. stoletja pr. Kr. sta upodobljena bojevnika na različnih konjih, levi je nekoliko višji in elegantnejši, desni nižji in bolj divjega videza (sl. 2). Upodobitev bi si morda lahko razložili kot dvoboj dveh jezdecev v religioznem kontekstu nagrobnih ali kakšnih drugih kulturnih iger, zanimivo pa je, da je na levem konju upodobljen sončni simbol v obliki svastike, kar po vsej verjetnosti pomeni, da gre za belega konja. Belega konja so Veneti žrtvovali Diomedu in ni povsem izključeno, da je levi jezdec jahal belega venetskega konja. Zgolj kot zanimivost naj še omenim, da so v drugi polovici 16. stoletja domačega kraškega konja (ki je torej izviral iz istega širšega območja kot beli venetski konji iz okolice reke Timave) oplemenitili s španskim, napolitanskim in arabskim konjem ter vzgojili slovitega hitrega lipicanca.