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KNIGHTS IN AZERBAIJAN

(14TH-12TH CENTURIES BC – 4TH CENTURY AD)

USUALLY, MENTIONING THE WORD «CHIVALRY» EVOKES COMPARISONS WITH WESTERN EUROPEAN MEDIEVAL KNIGHTS. AS SOON AS IT COMES TO KNIGHTS CLAD IN ARMOR, WE IMMEDIATELY RECALL THE LITERARY CHARACTERS IVANHOE AND QUENTIN DURWARD, THE KNIGHTS OF KING ARTHUR AND DON QUIXOTE. HOWEVER, STUDIES SHOW THAT AS A SOCIAL INSTITUTION KNIGHTS EXISTED IN THE EAST TOO. IN THE MIDDLE AGES KNIGHTS CHIVALRY IN AZERBAIJAN AND HAD A SIGNIFICANT INFLUENCE ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL RELATIONS, IDEOLOGY, PHILOSOPHY OF WAR AND PEACE AND WAS EVEN REFLECTED IN THE CUSTOMS, TRADITIONS AND FOLKLORE OF THE PEOPLE.



*Heavily armed horseman of the 1st-2nd centuries
 (based on the burial near the village of Rustov).
 Reconstruction of S. Ahmadov*

Genetically, medieval knights date back to ancient times when there appeared heavily armed warriors who could fight in heavy armor. Archaeological excavations carried out in the territory of Azerbaijan always gave unexpected results, surprising not only ordinary people but also professional historians. But what was excavated in the barrow near the village of Borsunlu in Azerbaijan's Tartar District in the 1980's surprised even seasoned archaeologists. Hundreds of utensils, weapons, jewels, ceramics and handicrafts were found virtually in every excavated mound. Finally, the top of everything was the discovery of the barrow of a tribal chief. Here in the barrow, a deep underground tomb, consisting of several rooms, was found. In one of them warriors in full armor were buried, in another - servants and slaves, and in the third one - horses in garb. **In the largest central room, the skeleton of the chief buried in full military garb and with weapons lied on the throne.** The armor of the chief and his steed were made of bronze in the form of elongated scales with a rounded bottom end. The finds were dated the 14th-12th centuries BC (1, p.4; 2, p. 21-23). Prior to the excavations in Borsunlu and excavations in the neighboring barrows of Beyimsarov and Sarichoban,

it was believed that heavy cavalry came to Azerbaijan with the tribes of Cimmerians, Saks and Scythians who founded their own states in northern Azerbaijan and in the Urmia area of South Azerbaijan in the 7th century BC (3, p. 8, 15). The scaly armor of the Scythians was flexible enough, and its weight was evenly distributed throughout the body and was not considered an extraordinary burden. It is interesting that the Scythians were armed with arrows with so-called armor-piercing tips that were able to pierce metal plates (4, p. 86). Consequently, on the territory of Azerbaijan the Scythians encountered warriors who used metal and more likely, bronze armor. Excavations of the 1940's in Mingachevir allowed us to make conservative assumptions: in one of the graves the skeleton of a warrior was found that was completely covered with bronze circular discs and convex buttons. In the following years, excavations were carried out in the barrows near the villages of Beyimsarov and Sarichoban and fragments of the armor of a horseman of the 11th-9th BC centuries were found. The barrows in Khanlar District of Azerbaijan in which the skeletons of physically very fit people with a height of 2.1 - 2.3 meters were found are also of interest. So, it was gradually confirmed that **the heavy cavalry in Azerbaijan was born in the era of antiquity.**

At the time of the state of Media (7th-4th century BC), heavy cavalry was seen as something usual. The presence of this cavalry, coupled with rapid light cavalry, secured Media's victory over the states of Assyria and Urartu, which were famous for their heavily armed infantry. The heavy cavalry of Median King Cyaxares wore metal helmets and scaly armor with



the same vambraces and greaves. Horses were also covered with armor, defending their forehead, chest and croup (5, p.39, 360). The weapons needed by each horseman were a 2-meter-long spear, a bow and arrows, a shield, a straight sword or Median saber, which was slightly curved like some Assyrian swords (6, p. 92, 97-99). Recently, Median burials were found near the village of Mollaisagli in Ismayilli District of Azerbaijan, and among them were many bronze figures of horsemen. Armor, a horse front strap and breast collar were clearly visible on the figures (12, p. 97).

The Achaemenid state, which had borrowed many elements of government, military business, life and culture from Media, also borrowed the heavy cavalry,

although the Achaemenid generals relied mostly on heavy infantry and chariots. It is no accident that in the Greek sources of the time the heavy cavalry of the Achaemenids is referred to as «Median cavalry».

The heyday of heavy cavalry in the East is associated with the Parthian Empire. The troops of this state combined the achievements of the peoples of both Central Asia and the Middle East, which was clearly evident in the wars with Rome. In Parthia, the tactical principles of the use of heavy cavalry probably fully took shape (the basics of these principles were already known to the Scythians) (13, p. 106). Lining up on the battlefield, heavily armed cavalry formed a cavalry phalanx relying upon which numerous lightly armed horsemen operated. The sight



Scythian heavily armed horseman. Reconstruction of A. McBride

of a closed formation of horsemen and horses clad in armor from head to toe also morally suppressed the enemy. Parthian horsemen were armed with a spear of up to 4.5 meters in length, bows and arrows, swords or battle axes. Mark Antony's military campaign in the Urmia zone in the 1st century BC turned the Azerbaijani state of Atropatena located here into a natural ally of Parthia. The allied relations and the joint struggle against the Romans led to an increase in the number of heavy cavalry in Atropatena (7, p. 75). In another Azerbaijani state of the time, Caucasian Albania, which was located to the north of Atropatena, there was no heavy cavalry as a type of troops. As a result, they had

to repel the attacks of the Roman armies of Pompey against Albanian kings with their own infantry, which resulted in heavy losses. Although the Romans failed to gain a foothold in Caucasian Albania, appropriate conclusions were made.

For example, in northern Azerbaijan, which was the core of Caucasian Albania, archaeologists have discovered a burial of the 1st century BC – 1st century AD with a set of weapons for heavily armed horsemen. Some of these graves belonged to the Sarmatians and others to Alans. Horsemen of heavy cavalry wore leather jackets trimmed with metal plates like metal scales. According to the finds, they used heavy spears (with a length of 2 - 4

m), heavy swords with a length of more than 1 meter, and arrows. It is believed that stirrups were unknown at the time, which is confirmed by stone bas-reliefs.

Caucasian Albania is a state that existed on the territory of northern Azerbaijan from the 4th century BC to the 8th century AD and imbibed the best achievements of both the East (Parthia, the Sassanids, the nomads of the North) and the West (Rome and Byzantium). At the same time, the local masters brought a lot of their own, creating new hitherto unknown methods of processing materials and elements of culture. In 1974-1976, during excavations near the village of Rustov (Guba) a unique armor was found in a grave of the 1st century BC – 1st century AD. Its upper part was ringed and had a length of 40-50 cm (i.e., from the shoulders to the waist), and the lower part consisted of elongated silver plates attached to the top of the armor in the form of a skirt. The rich equipment included not only ceramics, silverware, jewelry and household items, but also horse equipment, tips of heavy spears, darts, fragments of swords, daggers, knives and arrowheads. The iron vambracers found in the tomb are considered the first discovery of this type of weapon in Azerbaijan. Excavations showed how **local Albanian craftsmen managed to combine parts of different types of armor in one armor** (a short chain mail of the oriental type is connected to the metal plated «skirt» of the Greco-Roman style) (8, pp.123-132). It is no accident that authors of the early Middle Ages indicate the presence of heavy cavalry in the Albanian army.

In the 4th century, Huns and a little later Turkuts (Goy Turks) and Khazars settled in Azerbaijan. Arriving

*Heavily armed Albanian horseman of the 2nd century.
(Based on materials from the burial near the village of Nuydi).
Reconstruction of F. Osmanov and I. Mammadov*

through the «steppe corridor» from the north, warriors of these people wore longer scaly armor in the form of a robe, armor of large oblong plates sewn on a leather base, vambracers and greaves. It was mandatory to wear a metal helmet, usually of the spherical or spheroconical type.

Speaking above about heavy horsemen whose skeletons and weapons were found in Azerbaijan, we deliberately did not use the term «knights». Heavy cavalry was manned from the aristocratic (ruling) environment and actually spawned chivalry as a social institution, but at the turn of eras we cannot speak of the class of knights. The thing is that before the 3rd – 4th centuries heavy cavalry was not a caste or social group. Warriors of heavy cavalry differed from others only by heavy defensive armament, which they obtained from the state. However, in the 3rd – 4th centuries heavy cavalry began to be manned based on other principles.

The notion of a knight (ritter - «rider» in German) has its synonyms in different languages (Chevalier - «rider» in French; Faris - «rider» in Arabic), and in most cases, it means «horseman» (9, p. 101). Consequently, **the first sign of a knight is to have his own horse.** However, this is not the only sign of a knight. Relatively cheap bronze armor is replaced with more expensive steel armor and not every craftsman could produce steel from iron to manufacture armor and weapons. Now high quality defensive and offensive weapons had skyrocketed in price. The state could provide only a small number of palace guards with everything needed. However, the weapons and equipment of a large army were an enormous burden, not to mention the fact that this army had to be



maintained in peacetime. To buy high quality weapons, one required large and regular income, which only the possession of land could provide. Thus, in order to have heavy cavalry «at hand», the ruler had to provide its warriors with land that yielded revenues. Service in heavily armed cavalry suggested that warriors of cavalry had to be given significant land plots. Only ownership of land provided a sufficient and stable income for the purchase of expensive military equipment. A landowner became a feudal lord, that is to say the owner of a land plot and a knight, i.e. someone who was obligated to serve for the land he was given. Of course, a warrior was not engaged in management and production, as he was responsible for the purchase of arms and ammunition, training to use these weapons and participating in wars. So there appeared knights - a special category of people whose

only task was the ability to fight. A knight had to provide himself with a war horse, high-quality weapons, be able to wield these weapons and be ready to join a military campaign at any time at the call of the ruler. Constant wars led to the fact that knights began to receive benefits and formed their own hierarchy. As a result, **knights became a separate social institution of the feudal society.** Gradually they began to form their own knightly psychology and morality (9, p. 102-103).

Pictures of heavy horsemen of the early Middle Ages are found in the area from the Pacific Ocean to the border of Anatolia. In this period, armor was more advanced and covered the horseman entirely. Horse armor also became more complicated, although it became lighter. The chronicler Ammianus Marcellinus wrote about the heavy cavalry of the Sassanid state: «They



Materials from the burial of a heavily armed warrior in the village of Nuydi (Agsu District of Azerbaijan): helmet, armor plates, tips of spears, darts, arrows, swords, daggers and jewelry. National Museum of History of Azerbaijan

were squads clad in iron; iron plates covered all members so closely that bundles perfectly matched the movements of the body and the cover of the face was lay so well on the head that the whole body was

covered with iron, and the arrows could only pierce small holes that could be seen with an eye or where your breath came out of the nostrils with difficulty» (10). An image of Sassanid King Khosrow II (590-628)

on horseback and in full armor, discovered in a cave in Tak-i-Bustan in Iran, confirms this description. Heavy cavalry was manned in the Sassanid Empire and related countries of Central Asia and the



Heavily armed horseman of the 7th century. A fragment of a bas-relief in Tak-i-Bustan (Iran)

Caucasus, including Azerbaijan, from the serving military nobility - azads (Persian *free, noble*). Thus, **the word «azad», which means «free» in the modern Azerbaijani language, was used to mean a «knight» in the early Middle Ages** (9, p. 102).

The Sassanid Empire and related Caucasus countries, including Azerbaijan, were dominated by two types of land ownership in the 3rd-7th centuries: hereditary and conditional, i.e. received temporarily and for service. The first one was the privilege of the powerful feudal lords and the second one was associated with the middle and small military nobility. Azads of the second category belonged to the class of «horsemen» (Persian *suvari, asvar*) (7, p.97). In fact, these «asvars» were the backbone of chivalry. In the Sassanid state there was a special «list of horsemen» - those who were given land by the

ruler for which they were supposed to serve. Belonging to asvars was not hereditary, and land after the death of the holder was passed on to his son only if he remained on the «list of horsemen». The handover of a land plot meant not only a reward for an azad's service, but also confirmed his property rights and guaranteed a privileged position in society. Among the military nobility there was a system of hierarchy, and relationships between the various categories of azads were recorded in the «Azad-nameh» - certificates of immunity.

Thus, it is in the Sassanid Empire and related countries of the Caucasus, including in Azerbaijan, where chivalry took shape not only de facto, but also legally in the 3rd-7th centuries. ❀

(To be continued)

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