

EARLIEST HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF IBERIAN HORSES

by Peter C. Elder

Recently I was reading the excellent article by Karen Parker titled "Caballos de Destino, A Vanishing Breed" which I found on the website sorraiamustangs.net for the ranch in South Dakota. I was thinking about the history of the horses and I am fascinated by the idea that these are the same horses that were painted in the caves in France and Spain. I also know through my Celtic studies that the people who lived on the Iberian Peninsula and emerged in the earliest historical accounts by the Greek traders were Celtic tribes.

It is now generally accepted from archeology that the Celtic people reached Iberia around 1000 B.C. and are credited with bringing the Bronze Age to the peninsula. In the ancient world it was also well known that the Celts were a horse people. The first historical accounts are from Greek traders, the earliest being Herodotus (ca 490-425 BC). I decided that I would do some research on my own to see if I could find a direct account of the horses there. I found a wonderful site for translations of ancient texts from Greek and Roman writers, Bill Thayer's Web Site at the University of Chicago:

<http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/home.html>

I looked through the writing of Herodotus on Iberia but could not find any references to horses. His accounts were taken along the coastlines where the trading was taking place and it seemed he was not familiar much with the interior of the country. After a lot of further searching, the only direct accounts I found of horses were from Strabo (ca 63BC to 24 AD), a Romanized Greek writer from the eastern part of the Roman Empire in Syria. Strabo was known for his extensive histories of the development of the Roman Empire but he was never in the western part of the empire and relied on other writers for Iberian information. Although known for his histories, none of them have survived except through quotations from other ancient writers. He wrote a brief geography of Iberia which did survive where he quotes other writers, notably Poseidonius (ca 135-51 BC). Poseidonius was

also a Romanized Greek writer from the eastern end of the Roman Empire but he was very well travelled. Known as an early polymath, he wrote extensively in an early scientific manner on a multitude of topics. Poseidonius was known for his extensive geographies, the originals of which are all lost, except he was widely quoted by a large number of other ancient writers amongst his contemporaries. His works are also considered very reliable by scholars.

In Strabo's Geography, Book III, Chapter 4, I quote:

"The Iberians were once, virtually all of them, were peltests, and wore light armor on account of their brigand life (as I said of the Lusitanians), using javelin, sling and dirk. And intermingled with their forces of infantry was a force of cavalry, for their horses were trained to climb mountains, and, whenever there was a need for it, to kneel down promptly at the word of command. Iberia produces many deer and wild horses."

(Further down the page, he directly quotes Poseidonius):

"And it is peculiar to Iberia, according to Poseidonius, that the crows are black there and also that the slightly dappled horses of Celtiberia change their color when they brought over to Farther Iberia. The Celtiberian horses are like those of Parthia, he says, for not only are they faster but they are also smoother runners than the other horses."

These two small entries were all that I could find that had a direct reference to their horses, but what a lot of information to think about! First, an account of the horsemanship of these mountain dwelling people, teaching the horses to kneel on command in the rocks, and the observation that the country abounded with wild horses. The second entry with direct quotation of Poseidonius is also very notable. Now I will leave it up to the color experts to decipher what is meant by the "slightly dappled" and the fact that it changes in the western part of the peninsula

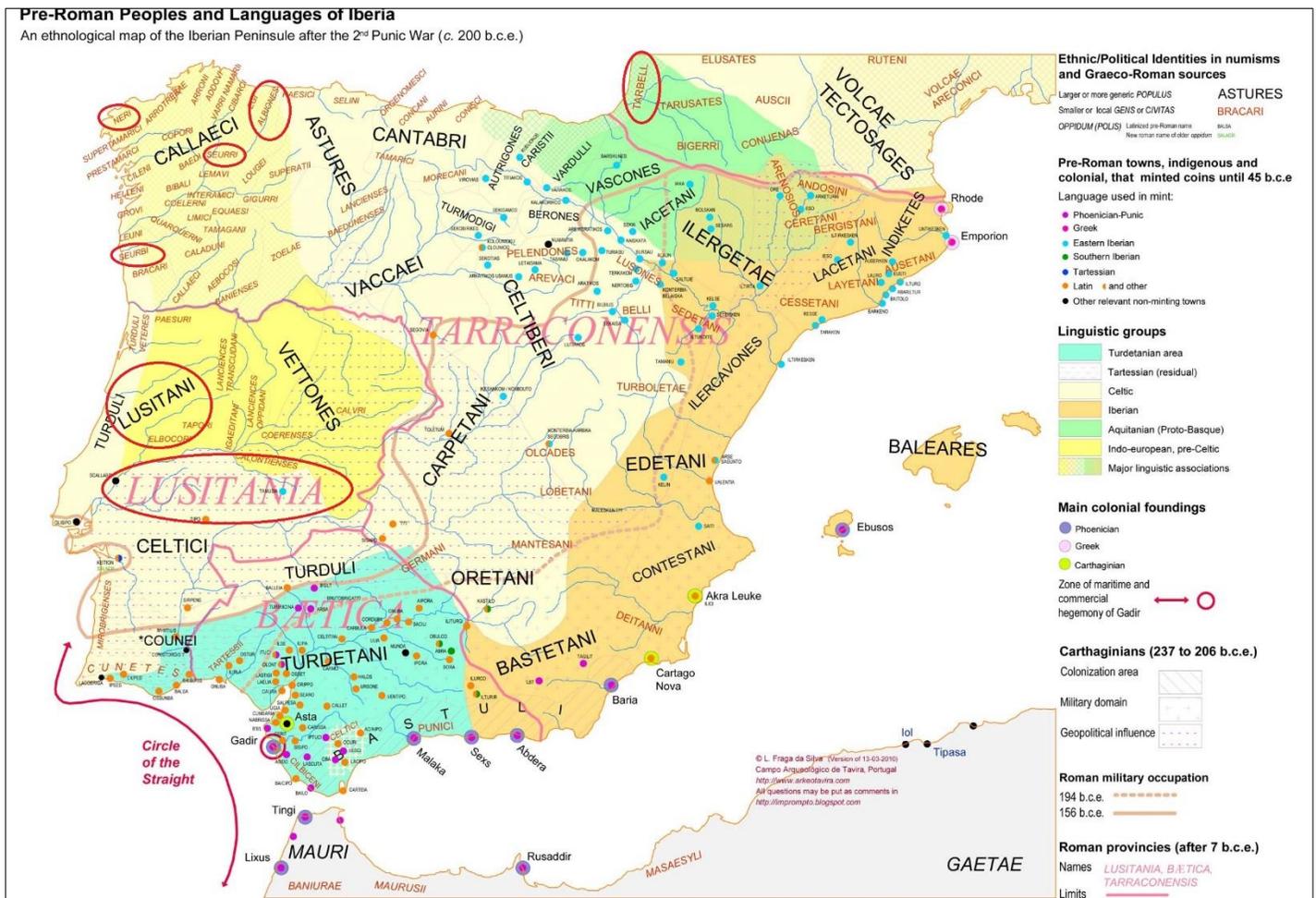
(affected by the ocean air?). The part about the Parthian horses really interests me. The Parthian Empire was at the eastern limits of the Roman Empire and was never successfully invaded by the Romans. Basically, the Parthians were nomadic horse tribes that managed to take over the Persian Empire and hold it against the Romans. They are well known in historical accounts for their tactic the "Parthian Shot" where warriors would feint a retreat from the enemy on horseback and then allowing the approaching enemy to come in close they would all turn in the saddle and ride backwards while shooting arrows. The horses were known to be hardy and mountain bred. The famous breed today in this area is the Akhal-Teke, but the various mountain tribes (Turkmen and others) are reported to still breed their own hardy varieties. Poseidonius grew up near the Parthians

and was definitely familiar with their horses as different from Roman and Greek types.

I also found a map of ancient Iberia (pictured above) by L. Fraga da Silva, copyright 2010, from an ethnological study about 200 BC at the following web site: <http://www.arkeotavira.com>

The map shows that the Lusitani were an early Iberian tribe!

Another interesting historical tie to the horses related to the Celts is the coinage of Gaul and Celtic Britain. Ireland and Scotland (which was Pictland during Roman times and earlier) were never under direct influence of the Romans and never had a coinage but from Gaul and Britain there are beautiful depictions of horses on the coins. It is highly likely that horses from Iberia were extensively used throughout Gaul which was a main part of the Celtic empire and just across the Pyrenees Mountains. I have noticed



that the Celtic coins have numerous depictions of full bodied horses where in Roman and other coins the depictions are usually busts of rulers with occasional horse head or if a full horse always with man and chariot. The Celts also had a horse Goddess named Epona who is depicted on the following coin from the country of the Redones in present day Brittany.

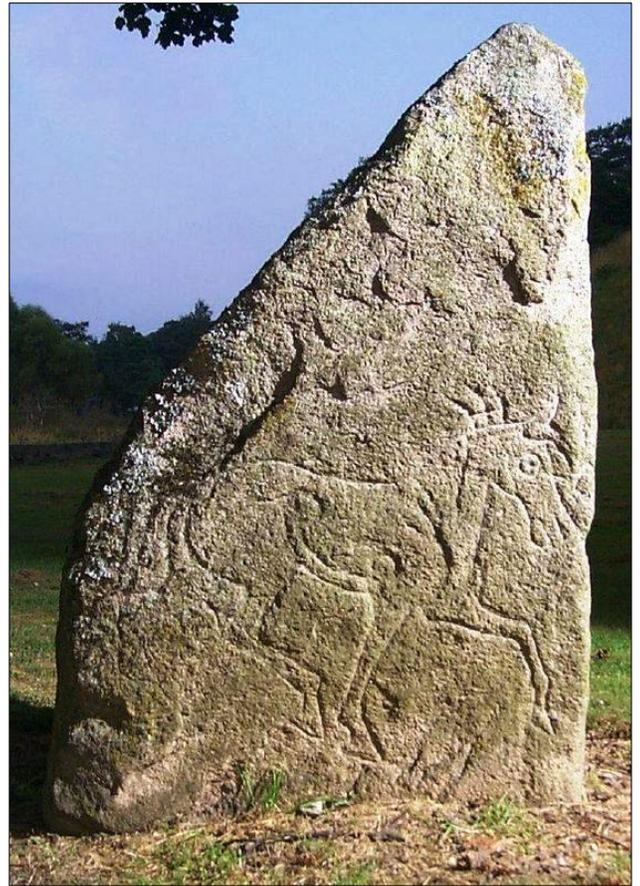


Here is another coin from a British tribe, not sure which one.



And finally I wanted to share one other interesting ancient artifact related to horses and Celts that I have thought about a lot. This is a prehistoric (or maybe the more proper term proto-historic) carving on a Pictish symbol stone of a very lifelike horse. The carving has such a lively and enthralling depiction of a horse that it has inspired artists worldwide. To me this carving has the distinguishing “square” conformation of the Iberian horse. The stone is called the Inverurie stone (from Inverurie, Scotland) and is a Class 1 Pictish symbol stone, with a date that is not fully agreed upon but has been assigned 5th to 7th century A.D. (Pictured at right)

This stone dates from historical times but little documented history is known of the Picts (or the



Caledonians as they called themselves) other than the historical accounts of the unsuccessful invasions by the Romans and later the Angles and Saxons. These Celtic tribal people, who used horses in chariots against the Romans, were so fierce that the Romans ended up building two different walls (along with soldiers stationed in forts) to try to keep them from continually invading the Romanized parts of southern Scotland. It would not be farfetched at all to think that Iberian horses were brought to Britain in ancient times. The Celtic empire stretched from Turkey to Iberia and included most of modern Europe. Gaul and Britain had extensive road networks, including bridges, for the horse drawn wheeled traffic that was a common part of their culture.

A good article I found that discusses Pictish horse carvings and horse use is by Irene Hughson published in 1991 in the Glasgow Archeological Journal, Volume 17 Issue 17, Page 53-62, ISSN 0305-8980 (Available online at (<https://doi.org/10.3366/gas.1991.17.17.53>) by the Edinburgh University Press, Scotland.