Ukraine and Camels: Features of the Incorporation into the Steppe Landscape

Anna Olenenko

Summary

For centuries camels roamed the Southern Ukrainian steppe. They occupied an essential place in the economic system and culture of the Muslim population of the Crimean peninsula and Northern Black Sea region – Crimean Tatars. Even after the annexation of the territory by the Russian Empire and the emigration of Tatars to Turkey, camels were still quite popular in the South at the beginning of the 20th century.

Camels and Ukraine, a country located in Europe, seem to be mutually exclusive. Now this is really so. But just a century or two ago camels roamed the steppes of modern Southern Ukraine.

Camels occupied an essential place in the economic system of the Muslim Tatars of the Crimean peninsula and Northern Black Sea region, which they had supposedly taken over from the nomads – Cumans and Turkic peoples – of the Golden Horde. Natural conditions of the steppe zone, such as the semi-arid climate, low rainfall, low-density river system, and treeless grasslands, as well as cultural aspects such as the nomadic way of life and the respect for camels preached by Islam, contributed to the spread of the use of camels on the new lands.

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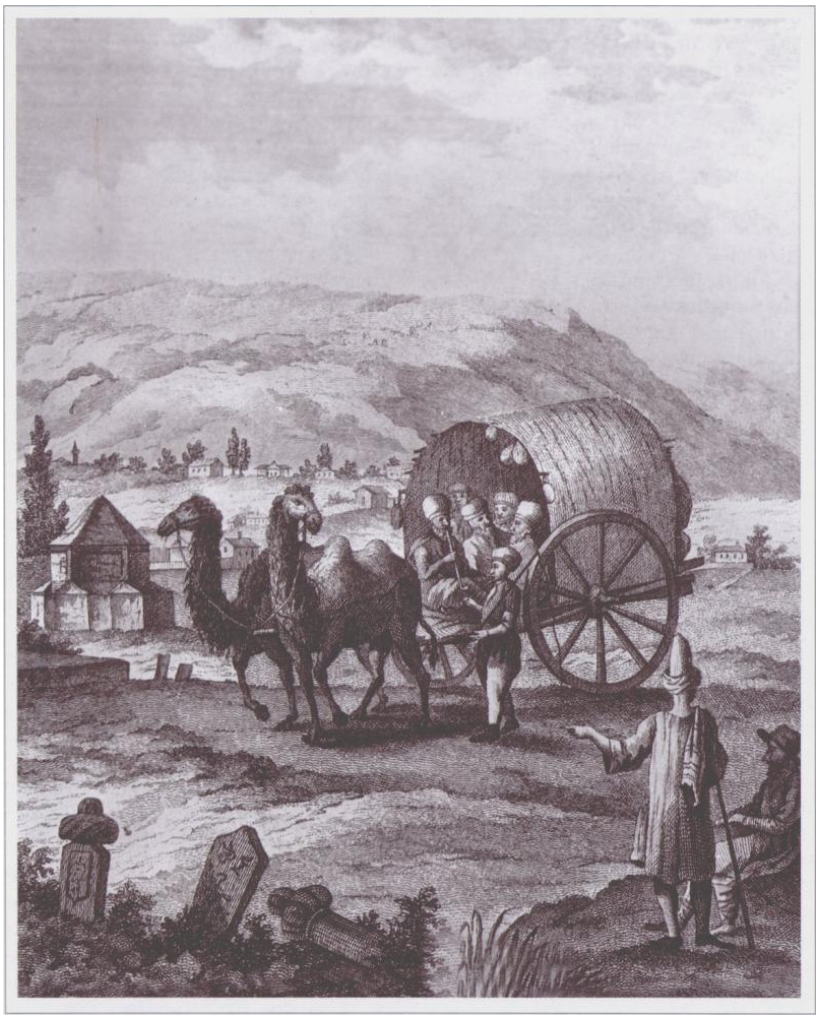

Tatar's cart harnessed by camels

Author: A. De Paldo
Original name: *Cart named arba*
Published in: Досуги крымского судьи или второе путешествие в Тавриду Павла Сумарокова. - Ч. 1. - Санкт-Петербург, 1803. – 235 (Dosug krymskogo sudi ili vtoroe puteshestvie v Tavridu Pavla Sumarokova. – Ch.1. – Saint Petersburg, 1803. – 235)

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As mentioned in the travel notes and diaries of travelers who made journeys to the Northern Black Sea and Crimea between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, camels became popular for cartage transport, freight haulage, passenger transportation, and riding. Moreover, camels were a source of milk and meat for the local population. Camel leather and wool were used to build homes and to weave clothes.

Camels occupied a significant place not only in Tatar economy, but also in their culture, as shown, for example, by lithographs depicting camel races or Tatar wedding processions with grooms on camels.

It is noteworthy that even after the Northern Black Sea region and Crimea became part of the Russian Empire at

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the end of the eighteenth century as a consequence of the Russo-Turkish War of 1768–1774, camels continued to play a pivotal role in the life of the steppe population. Despite the attempts at unification and standardization of all spheres of life in the new imperial territories, the regional authority borrowed some economic traditions from the Crimean Tatars, including the use of camels. This was due to both the need to facilitate the painless integration of the local people and the peculiar natural conditions of the new lands that were uncharacteristic for the Russian Empire.

The use of camels in military times

Author: Konstantin Philippov
Original name: *Военная дорога между Севастополем и Симферополем во время Крымской войны. 1858* ("Military road between Sevastopol and Simferopol during Crimean War. 1858")
Place of preservation: The State Tretyakov Gallery

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Different scholars who explored the potential of the annexed territories noted that camels could be used in wartime. In the first place, they were deemed to be very effective in hauling artillery. Secondly, according to the outstanding naturalist Peter Pallas, camels "are needed near the infantry in order to put to flight all the enemy's cavalry in case of attack." He claimed, in fact, that horses, not being accustomed to camels, would be driven to flight at first sight of them.

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In addition, the local authorities even started projects to spread the use of camels from Crimea to the whole steppe region. There were various discussions about different ways to use camels and improve their potential productivity on the pages of Russian periodicals.

The area was populated, beside Tatars, by another Muslim nomadic people, the Nogais, which lived in the Northern Black Sea region from the end of the eighteenth to the middle of the nineteenth century and who also kept camels in their households. Emigration of these two ethnicities to the Turkish Empire during the nineteenth century and their eviction from Crimea during the Second World War were central elements of the gradual disappearance of camels from contemporary Ukraine during the twentieth century, together with the plowing of the steppe which led to the transformation of the nomadic cattle economy into settlement agriculture during the nineteenth century, as well as the development of transport infrastructures and agricultural mechanization. Now there are only small numbers of camels that are used exclusively as tourist attractions.

Southern Ukrainian Steppe (Zaporizhia region) in 2007

Photo by Anna Olenenko, 12 July 2007.

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Further readings:

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- https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%A4%D0%B0%D0%B9%D0%BB:%D0%92%D0%BE%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%8F_%D0%B4%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B3%D0%B0_%D0%BC%D0%B5%D0%B6%D0%B4%D1%83_%D0%A1%D0%B5%D0%B2%D0%B0%D1%81%D1%82%D0%BE%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%B5%D0%BC_%D0%B8_%D0%A1%D0%B8%D0%BC%D1%84%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%B5%D0%BC_%D0%B2%D0%BE_%D0%B2%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%BC%D1%8F_%D0%9A%D1%80%D1%8B%D0%BC%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%B9_%D0%B2%D0%BE%D0%B9%D0%BD%D1%8B.jpg

About the author:

Anna Olenenko
Anna Olenenko graduated from Zaporizhia National University in 2007 and got her PhD in history from National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine in 2013. Her PhD thesis was related to the history of Southern Ukraine in the second half

of the 18th century and its transformation (social, political, environmental etc.) after the annexation of the territory by the Russian Empire. Anna's research interests include environmental history of steppe regions, animal studies, oral history, and resource studies.

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