

Local Interest Group 26th November 2015

Present: Mo Lloyd, Edwina Griffiths, Wendy and Dainis Ozols, Jenny Francis, John Price (Rhosgoch), Lee, Wendy and Becky Miles, Ros Coles, Clare Mitchell, Evelyn Bally, Ruth Davies, Doe Middleton, Avryl and Roy Lloyd, Richard and Sally Harris, Di Beardsall, Nigel Fromant, Sue Farmer, Carol Gibbs, Adrian Chambers, Lisa Lloyd, Wendy Cadwallender, Sue Ievers, John and Margaret Price (Hay) and our guests, Dr Duncan Noble and Vicky Bernays.

Mo Lloyd opened the meeting by welcoming everyone and saying how pleased she was to see such a large number of people. She then introduced the speaker for the evening, Dr Duncan Noble, an archaeologist and former college lecturer. He has written numerous books, both fiction and non-fiction, and his latest is called, "Dawn of the Horse Warriors".

Dr Noble thanked people for turning out on a winter's night to listen to him and said that he would be talking about the domestication of horses. He told us that he has ridden around one hundred different horses in his time and has taken part in most riding activities, although he has never played polo! He still rides regularly and his horse is looked after by Becky Miles at Bryngwyn.

He showed us a map of Asia and indicated the region where the native horse originated; this closely approximates with the steppe (a large area of natural grassland) to the east of European Russia. He told us that the limit of the natural "homeland" of the horse was 52°N; beyond this it was too cold and there was nothing for horses to eat. North of this latitude the reindeer is the main domesticated animal; they are well adapted to the harsh environment of the more northerly latitudes. The horse, on the other hand, was native to that part of Asia where there is a continental climate with a large temperature range. The Himalayas limited the extent of horses and horsemen to the south. (He added that horses were taken to the Americas by the Spanish from the late 15th century onwards and that the Native Americans had not seen such an animal before this.)

There were three types of horse found on the steppes. These were: the European Pony which was very tough and about 13 hands; the Tarpan which was about the same size and which is now extinct (the last one was killed in 1850); and, Przewalski's Horse, named after the Russian explorer Nikolai Przhevalsky, also known as the Mongolian wild horse. Some of these Przewalski's Horse still exist in zoos, but there have been none left in the wild since 1966.

Dr Noble then went on to explain the difference between domestication (horses that are kept for milking and which can be led) and taming (horses that can be ridden or used for driving). There is early evidence of the domestication of horses, but no-one knows when they started to be tamed. At one site in the south of Ukraine, archaeologists have found 3763 bones and these have been radiocarbon dated to 4200-3700 BC. Sixty per cent of these were horse bones and it is probable that the animals had been domesticated as there was no evidence that they had been shot with bows and arrows. The horses were all between five and seven years old. This is presumed to have been a slaughtering site. (There was no way of telling whether the animals had been tamed and, in fact, the earliest evidence of people riding horses comes from about 2000 BC.) He added that radiocarbon dating can only tell you how old the horse was when it died; it tells you little else about the animal.

At another site in Tajikistan, Botai, further bones have been found and dated to 3700-3000 BC. Many of these horses had worn bits made of rope, probably of the jointed snaffle design; these

leave marks on the bones. The people who kept these horses were pastoral nomads. The steppe consists of poor quality grassland and so it was necessary to move around looking for pasture for the horses. Because their diets were poor, the horses were small, around 13 hands, but they were very strong and fast. At this stage, Dr Noble made the point that evidence of a bit having been used does not always indicate that the horses had been ridden; the bit may have been used to lead the animals. There is also evidence that the mares were being milked at this time.

Once the horse was actually tamed, from about 2000 BC, the people who kept them rode on blankets rather than saddles. This made riding easier, but they were not very good for fighting. Reins were used, but would be dropped when the rider needed to shoot with his bow and arrow. It is probable that the saddle as we would recognise it today was invented in the east of Ukraine at a very much later date.

As part of a question and answer session at the end, we learned the following:

- Horses came to China relatively late on in history.
- People probably rode reindeer in the northern latitudes in the past, in Dr Noble's opinion.
- Horses have evolved into the different types that we recognise today because of human intervention and selective breeding. All horses originate from those that lived in the relatively narrow belt of the steppe in Asia and they looked a little like pit ponies.
- There were no cattle in the part of Asia covered in Dr Noble's talk – only reindeer in the taiga to the north and horses on the steppe.
- Use of chariots almost definitely pre-dates the riding of horses.

Mo Lloyd ended by thanking Dr Noble for giving so generously of his time in coming to talk to the Local Interest group. Refreshments were enjoyed by all.