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## Notes on Alcohol in Pre-Russian Siberia

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## Notes on Alcohol in Pre-Russian Siberia

Thomas T. Allsen

Eugene, Oregon

*For Basil Dmytryshyn*

*Dedicated Teacher, Distinguished Scholar, and Dear Friend*

### INTRODUCTION

In describing the people of Thule, the northernmost land in the Roman world, the fifth-century Byzantine chronicler Priscus made a special point of noting they had no wine.<sup>1</sup> Some seven hundred years later, Marco Polo said the same about the inhabitants of the plain of Barghu east of Lake Baikal.<sup>2</sup> This image of the north was indeed ancient and persistent among Mediterranean peoples, for whom the absence of grape wine served as an index of primitiveness and deprivation. It is true, of course, that the vine did not grow in these latitudes, but it does not follow that their inhabitants were wholly deprived of the comforts of alcohol. Other locally grown base materials for fermented drink were available, as were foreign imports.

Although the peoples of the south were at times misinformed about those in the north, the accuracy of their perceptions varied appreciably in time and space. In the forest zone west of the Urals, for example, the drinks and drinking habits of medieval Slavic and Uralic populations are well

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<sup>1</sup> R. C. Blockley, tr., *The Fragmentary Classicising Historians of the Later Roman Empire: Eunapius, Olympiodorus, Priscus and Malchus*, vol. II, *Text, Translation and Historiographical Notes* (Liverpool: Francis Cairns, 1983), 375.

<sup>2</sup> Marco Polo, *The Description of the World*, tr. A. C. Moule and Paul Pelliot (London: Routledge, 1938), 177.

documented in the Greek and Old Russian sources. Perhaps somewhat more surprisingly, similar documentation on alcohol consumption in western and central Siberia is available in Muslim and Chinese accounts dating from the same period.

The purpose of this paper is to collect and analyze a representative selection of the scattered references concerning the drinking cultures of Siberian peoples from the eighth century to the Russian occupation in the seventeenth century.

The period chosen for examination simply reflects my own long-term research interests and familiarity with the relevant sources. These include Chinese, Muslim Turkic and Mongolian materials as well as what the Russians observed and recorded on the occasion of their early contacts with the peoples of Siberia. Although emphasis is placed on the testimony of written records, I have tried to verify and amplify these with the aid of data drawn from archaeology, ethnography, folklore and historical linguistics. As a point of departure, a general characterization of these diverse sources is provided for purposes of orientation, an exercise that has the added benefit of throwing further light on the early evolution and application of the rather fluid term *Sibir* and its variants.

The first thing to be noted is that despite the limitations and ambiguities of the available evidence, there is absolutely no doubt that alcohol consumption was well established and common among the inhabitants of southern Siberia many centuries before the commencement of the present survey. Its prevalence is graphically conveyed by the large number of stone statues (*balbal*) from the Altai dating to the era of the Türk Qaghanate (552–744). The majority of these individualized (and originally painted) representations are depicted holding bowls or cups against their stomachs. In other words, this was a society whose major investment in the field of public, representational art repeatedly features males and occasionally females in the act of ceremonial drinking.

The predominant opinion of specialists is that the statues are “stand-ins” for deceased warriors and ancestors who through this medium became participants in their own funerary and memorial feasts.<sup>3</sup> The principal goal of these celebrations was twofold: to mobilize and channel the spiritual powers of progenitors in the afterworld and to fashion collective identity and solidarity in

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<sup>3</sup> G. V. Kubarev, “Ancient Turkic Statues: Epic Hero or Warrior Ancestor?” *Archaeology, Ethnography and Anthropology of Eurasia* 29/1 (2007): 136–44 and illus. XX–XXIII.

this world. Although this interpretation of the archaeological data is persuasive and consistent with practices better documented in the steppe, the statues themselves provide no indication of the kind of drink enjoyed at these celebrations.

The same difficulty is met with in some of the literary sources, even those of a later date. The lack of specifics is well illustrated in the earliest depictions of a shamanic ritual in Siberia offered by Muslim geographers of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. In describing the Yenisei Qirghiz they relate briefly that a soothsayer, accompanied by music, drinking (*al-shurb*) and carousing (*al-qasf*), falls into a trance and then predicts the future, a portrayal that is compatible with what is known historically and ethnographically about these performances throughout North Asia.<sup>4</sup> But again, what is being consumed is left unsaid, though one can confidently surmise, as in the previous instance, that it was alcoholic.

Turning to the Chinese sources, those produced under the Tang Dynasty (618–907) are more detailed and provide specifics concerning the drinks involved. Unlike the Muslim compilers, for whom geography was mainly an academic enterprise, the Tang court was much closer to the scene and had an interest in accurate intelligence about their northern neighbors, the Uighur Empire (742–840) in the eastern steppe and the Qirghiz in the forest zone. This explains why, as will become apparent presently, the coverage of the Yenisei region looms so large in the court records generated by states based in North China.

Even more dramatic, however, is the advance in knowledge of the north that accompanied the rise of the Chinggisid Empire (1206–ca.1370). Like other steppe nomads, the Mongols had major strategic and economic interests in the forest zone. Its importance to them clearly emerges from a diplomatic report prepared in 1237 by two Song envoys. In their summary of the early Mongolian conquests, the subjugation of the forest zone, represented by the defeat of the Merkit (Mie-li-qi) and Urusut (Wu-lu-su), receives equal billing with the far more famous campaigns in China, Turkistan and

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4 V. V. Bartol'd, ed. and tr., "Iz vlecheniia iz Gardīzī *Zayn al-Akhhār*" in his *Sochineniia*, 9 vols. (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo nauka, glavnaia redaktsiia vostochnoi literatury, 1973) VIII, 30, Persian text, and 48, trans.; A. P. Martinez, tr., "Gardīzī's Two Chapters on the Turks," *Archivum Eurasiae Medii Aevi* 2 (1982): 128; and Vladimir Minorsky, tr. *Sharaf al-Zamān Tāhir Marvazī on China, the Turks and India* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1942), \*19, Arabic text, and 30, trans. for direct quote.

the western steppe.<sup>5</sup> Without doubt, this reflects an “imperial” perspective imparted to the envoys by their Mongolian hosts and informants.

Collectively, the Mongols called their northern neighbors *hoi-yin irgen*, “peoples of the forest,” a usage first found in the *Secret History*, their account of the rise of the empire compiled in the 1240s.<sup>6</sup> Following the subjugation of the forest zone in the early decades of the thirteenth century, the Mongols established a considerable presence there in the form of permanent military garrisons and civilian administrative personnel composed mainly of Chinese and Muslims charged with the collection of tribute and the extraction and processing of raw materials, principally salt and iron. This continued throughout the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368) whose presence extended from Sakhalin and the Pacific to the western part of the Yenisei basin which bordered on the territory of the Golden Horde.<sup>7</sup> As a result, much new, detailed information on the ethnography, geography and natural resources of Siberia entered Chinese records of the era.

More unexpectedly, there is also a noticeable growth in the quantity and quality of information on Siberia in the Persian sources. This is largely but not exclusively found in the works of Rashīd al-Dīn (d. 1318), the noted statesman and scholar who served under the Il-qans, the Chinggisid rulers in West Asia (1255–1335). In the first of his monumental four-volume *Collected Chronicles*, covering the history of Eurasia from China to the Franks, he provides a systematic and extended account of the Mongolian and Turkic peoples of the steppe and the forest. His work is based on lost Mongolian records and narratives and on what would now be called oral history derived from interviews with representatives of forest peoples stationed in Iran. To cite one example of the large Siberian presence there, the Chinggisids recruited from the region of Baikal an “army” of Mongolian-speaking Oirats, which included soldiers, with their families and dependents, who came west in the

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<sup>5</sup> Peng Daya and Xu Ting, *Heida shilue in Menggu shiliao sizhong*, ed. Wang Guowei (Taipei: Zhengzhong shuju, 1975), 517.

<sup>6</sup> Igor de Rachewiltz, tr., *The Secret History of the Mongols: A Mongolian Epic Chronicle*, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2004), I, §§ 202, 207, 239 and 241, and II, 786–87.

<sup>7</sup> John Dardess, “From Mongol Empire to Yuan Dynasty: Changing Forms of Imperial Rule in Mongolia and Central Asia,” *Monumenta Serica* 30 (1972–73): 149 ff., and Anatolii Trekhsviatky, “At the Far Edge of the Chinese Oikoumene: Mutual Relations of the Indigenous Population of Sakhalin with the Yuan and Ming Dynasties,” *Journal of Asian History* 41 (2007): 131–55.

1250s and who thereafter gained much notoriety in consequence of their continued involvement in the succession struggles of the Il-qan court.<sup>8</sup>

Given his sources and methods, it is not surprising that Rashīd al-Dīn is acquainted with the Mongolian *hoi-yin irgen*, transliterated as *hūyīn irkān*, or that he also uses a Persian calque, *qaum-i nīshah*, "tribes of the forest" and a hybrid form, *qaum-i hūyīn*, with the same meaning.<sup>9</sup> In employing these terms, he clearly expected his readers to understand that the people so designated were inhabitants of the taiga and tundra, "the Land of Darkness" in Muslim geographical nomenclature.

From these and later sources it is possible to track the changing meaning and geographical configuration of the term Siberia in the centuries leading up to the Russian conquest.<sup>10</sup> In the form Shibir, the name is first attested in the *Secret History* and is used on this occasion as an ethnonym to designate one of the forest people who initially submitted to Chinggis Qan in 1207–08.<sup>11</sup> The next mention comes from Rashīd al-Dīn; in his usage, however, Shibir is now part of an unexplained couplet, Ibīr Sībīr, which, moreover, has been transformed into a toponym, an inhabited land (*vilāyat*) enumerated together with others such as Turkistan and the Qipchaq steppe.<sup>12</sup> From indications in his text, Ibīr Sībīr is identified with the territory extending from the plain of Barghu to the Ob and Irtysh. This, too, is the case in the *History of the Yuan Dynasty (Yuanshi)* compiled in 1370, in which I-bi-er Shi-bi-er is again identified as a territory (*di*) centered on the Yenisei basin.<sup>13</sup> Muslim and European sources from the early decades of the fifteenth century continue to use this couplet as the name of a

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8 For documentation and details, see Thomas T. Allsen, "Population Movements in Mongol Eurasia" in *Nomads as Agents of Cultural Exchange: The Mongols and Their Eurasian Predecessors*, ed. Reuven Amitai and Michal Biran (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015), 120 and 127–28.

9 Rashīd al-Dīn, *Jāmi' al-tāwārikh*, ed. A. A. Alizade (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo nauka, 1968), I/1, 108, 239 and 410.

10 For an introductory survey of the term, see Peter B. Golden, "Sibir," *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd ed. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1960–2007), IX, 531–33.

11 *Secret History* tr. de Rachewiltz, I, § 239, and II, 853–54.

12 Rashīd al-Dīn ed. Alizade, I/1, 72–73 and 346.

13 *Yuanshi* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1976), ch. 132, 3209.

country north of the central section of the Eurasian steppe.<sup>14</sup> Lastly, just about the time the Russians reached the Amur in the mid-seventeenth century, the Turkish historian Abūl Ghāzī states that “Ibir and Sibir” are “two provinces (*vilayat*)” bordering on the Yenisei, a usage that provides a plausible explanation for the origin of the couplet.<sup>15</sup> To the best of my knowledge, in this period the name Sibir in its varied forms is never applied to territories east of the Barghu plain; this appears only after the Russian occupation.

From the foregoing materials I have identified five alcoholic drinks consumed in pre-Russian Siberia; four of these can be categorized by their base material and one by method of preparation, distillation, a process that can be applied to all fermented beverages. We begin, fittingly, with those beverages that are truly Siberian “domestics” developed by indigenous people exploiting indigenous raw materials.

#### BIRCH AND ROOT BEER

Of these, the most noticed is birch beer. The earliest reference to this drink appears in a rather curious document, a summary of the itineraries of five Uighur envoys found in a later Tibetan text that apparently derives from a Uighur oral report dating to the mid-eighth century. Here, in a description of the Ye-dre, an otherwise unknown and unidentified people living in the vicinity of Baikal, there is a brief but informative comment on their drinking habits: “As for the birch tree [they] milk its wood like mothers’ milk to make beer.”<sup>16</sup> Four centuries later Rashīd al-Dīn reports the same drink among the Forest Uriyangqai (Uṛiyankqat-i pīshṭah) inhabiting the same general region. In a passage that has the ring of a response to a question solicited from devotees of the beverage, he informs us that “When

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<sup>14</sup> Ahmad Ibn Arabshah, *Tamerlane or Timur the Great Amir*, tr. J. H. Sanders (repr. Lahore: Progressive Publishers, n. d.), 77, and Johann Schiltberger, *The Bondage and Travels of Johann Schiltberger*, tr. J. Buchan Tefler (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1879), 34.

<sup>15</sup> Aboul Ghāzī Béhādour Khān, *Histoire des Mongols et des Tatars*, ed. Petr I. Demaisons (repr. Amsterdam: Philo Press, 1970), 42, Turkic text, and 43, trans.

<sup>16</sup> Frederica Venturi, “An Old Tibetan Document on the Uighurs: A New Translation and Interpretation,” *Journal of Asian History* 42 (2008): 26.



they score the birch tree then from it flows [sap] just like sweet milk; they drink it in place of water. Their opinion is such that there is nothing better in this life and that no others are as blissful as they."<sup>17</sup> There is no reference to fermentation in this description, but the "blissful" mood induced certainly speaks to its alcoholic content.

The northern range of birch beer is difficult to determine but it may have extended to southern Kamchatka, where in 1741 Krashenninikov saw the Kamchadals making a fermented drink from the sap of the birch.<sup>18</sup> From his portrayal of its production and consumption it seems to be a well-established domestic tradition rather than a recent innovation or introduction.

Later travel accounts and ethnographic observations among the Kets of the middle Yenisei provide additional details on its preparation. From these we learn that as soon as the buds emerge in the springtime the Kets begin scoring the trees and capturing the sap in a basket; some of the liquid they drink fresh or, using a decoction of grasses and herbs found in marshes, they brew beer.<sup>19</sup> For the peoples of the forest, this clearly represented a transition of cardinal importance, a time of renewal, celebration and thanksgiving.

Birch beer was also widely known and appreciated farther to the west, for it was the "national" drink of the Ob-Ugrians.<sup>20</sup> It was popular as well on the other side of the Urals. Ibn Fadlān, on a diplomatic mission to the Volga region in 922, says that the Bulgars collected sap from a tall tree that makes a man "drunk in the same manner as wine."<sup>21</sup> The Russians, too, favored the beverage. An English commercial agent in 1557 reports the popularity of *berozeuites* [*berezovitsa*], which he says

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<sup>17</sup> Rashīd al-Dīn ed. Alizade, I/1, 243.

<sup>18</sup> Stepan P. Krashenninikov, *Explorations of Kamchatka: North Pacific Scimitar*, tr. E. A. P. Crownhart-Vaughan (Portland: Oregon Historical Society, 1972), 110.

<sup>19</sup> E. A. Alekseenko, *Kety: Istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki* (Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo nauka, leningradskoe otdelenie, 1967), 126.

<sup>20</sup> Toivo Vuorela, *The Finno-Ugric Peoples* (Indiana University Uralic and Altaic Series, no. 39; Bloomington, 1964), 313.

<sup>21</sup> A. Zeki Validi Togan, ed. and tr., *Ibn Fadlān's Reisebericht* (Leipzig: Deutsche morgenländische Gesellschaft, 1939), 27, Arabic text, and 59, trans.

was seasonal, available only for the three months of springtime.<sup>22</sup> At the end of the eighteenth century another English traveler reports that “a well tasted liquor called birch beer” is made from sap to which the Russians add sugar to increase its potency.<sup>23</sup>

Obviously, birch beer had a wide following across northern Eurasia. It did not, however, travel well outside the forest zone; in any event it had little appeal for the nomads. Their disdain is expressed in the Turkic epic *Manas* in which a Qirghiz of the Tianshan “milks the putrid birch and drinks it.”<sup>24</sup> Apparently, in the eyes of steppe peoples birch beer was a very poor substitute for fermented mares’ milk, their “national” drink.

Because of the wide distribution of the birch, the most common tree along the steppe-forest interface, the question of the origin of birch beer in time and space is only answerable in general terms. The best way to approach the question is to look into the cultural history of the tree among the Siberian peoples.

From pre-history onward, birch wood and bark have played a visible if not predominant role in the region’s economy and material culture. The bark was used to make boxes and baskets (including those to collect sap) and is found frequently among grave goods in the Ob-Irtysh region.<sup>25</sup> In the burial sites of semi-nomadic peoples east of Baikal dating from the tenth to thirteenth centuries, tent frames, vessels, troughs and other household utensils fashioned from birch wood have been recovered.<sup>26</sup> Starting in the mid-eighth century, historical sources also note birch bark was extensively

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22 E. Delmar Morgan and C. H. Coote, eds., *Early Voyages and Travels to Russia and Persia by Anthony Jenkinson and Other Englishmen*, 2 vols. (repr. New York: Burt Franklin, 1963), II, 377, and *Slovar russkogo iazyka XI-XVII vv.*, 24 vols. to date (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo nauka, 1975–), I, 145.

23 William Tooke, *View of the Russian Empire*, 2nd ed., 3 vols. (repr. New York: Arno Press, 1970), III, 255 and 353–54.

24 Arthur T. Hatto, ed. and tr., *The Memorial Feast of Kökötöy Khan: A Kirghiz Epic Poem* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 21.

25 Ludmilla Koryakova and Andrej Epimakhov, *The Urals and Western Siberia in the Bronze and Iron Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 100, 104, 216, 256, 282 and 334.

26 I. V. Assev, I. I. Kirillov and E. V. Kovychev, *Kochevniki Zabaikal'ia v epokhu srednevekov'ia* (Novosibirsk: Izdatel'stvo nauka, sibirskoe otdelenie, 1984), 73 and 192, illus. XL/1, and N. V. Imenokhoev, “K voprosu o kul'ture rannyikh mongolov (po dannym arkheologii) in *Etnokul'turnye protsessy v Iugo-Vostochnoi Sibiri v srednie veka*, ed. T. M. Mikhailov

used to cover tents and lean-tos and that it was the preferred material for quivers.<sup>27</sup> All these applications as well as the techniques of their manufacture survived into recent times and are fully documented in the ethnographic record.<sup>28</sup>

The importance of birch in the economy of Siberian peoples is further underscored by its demand in the south. Among the products of the Qirghiz and Turkish lands enumerated by tenth- and eleventh-century Muslim authors are *khadang* and *khalanj* wood.<sup>29</sup> Revealingly, the terms used in this text, once thought to be Persian in origin, actually go back to forms found in the Turkic languages of Siberia.<sup>30</sup>

As might be expected, the birch tree also figured prominently in the mythology and spiritual life of many Siberian people—Samoyeds, Ob-Ugrians, Yakuts and others. It is used in many religious rituals, identified with the first shaman and with the Tree of Life on which he ascends to the Upper World through the various levels of Heaven.<sup>31</sup> And it seems more than likely that the birch is the Axis Mundi in so many Siberian cultures because of its close symbiotic relationship to fly agaric (*Amanita*

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(Novosibirsk: Izdatel'stvo nauka, sibirskoe otdelenie, 1989), 56.

<sup>27</sup> Venturi, "An Old Tibetan Document on the Uighurs," 23, 25 and 26; *Xin Tangshu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), ch. 217b, 6148; Rashīd al-Dīn ed. Alizade, I/1, 243; and *Secret History*, tr. de Rachewiltz, I, §§ 178 and 230.

<sup>28</sup> Alekseenko, *Kety*, 82–84 and 112–21; A. P. Okladnikov, *Yakutia before Its Incorporation into the Russian State* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1970), 243; Waldemar Jochelson, "Kumiss Festivals of the Yakut and the Decoration of Kumiss Vessels" in *Anthropological Papers Written in Honor of Franz Boaz* (New York: G. E. Strechert & Co. 1906), 266–71; Waldemar Jochelson, *The Yakut* (Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History, vol. 33, pt. II; New York, 1933): 205–17; and James Forsyth, *A History of the Peoples of Siberia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 12–14, 20, 52 and 55.

<sup>29</sup> Vladimir Minorsky, tr., *Hudūd al-'Alam*, 2nd ed. (London: Luzac, 1970), 96, and Tha'ālābī, *The Book of Curious and Entertaining Information: The Laṭā'if al-Ma'ārif*, tr. C. E. Bosworth (Edinburgh: The University Press, 1968), 142.

<sup>30</sup> Andrés Róna-Tas, "The Periodization and Sources of Chuvash Linguistic History," in *Chuvash Studies*, ed. Andrés Róna-Tas (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1982), 163–64, and Bertold Laufer, *Sino-Iranica: Chinese Contributions to the History of Civilization in Ancient Iran* (repr. Taipei: Cheng-wen, 1967), 552–53.

<sup>31</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), XIV, 39, 70, 116–22, 173, 191, 194 and 232.

*muscaria*), the “magic mushroom,” the famed hallucinogen of the north that aids the shaman on spiritual quests.<sup>32</sup>

Looking at the data as a whole, it is evident that the inhabitants of Siberia had long experience in the physical and spiritual manipulation of the birch through which they gained a wide appreciation of its varied properties and potential uses. There can be little doubt that birch beer was ancient in Siberia, where it was certainly thought to be a bestowal of a giving, beneficent nature. It therefore seems most likely that it originated somewhere in south central Siberia rather than west of the Urals, since the Volga-Kama region had other base materials for fermented drink, principally honey, and there birch beer was very much a secondary or supplementary beverage, not a central feature in their material and spiritual culture.

To complete the rather limited list of the Siberian “domestics,” the only other plausible candidate I have encountered is found among the Shor, a Turkic-speaking people in middle Yenisei. They prepare an alcoholic beverage called *abirtka* from the boiled and then fermented root of Dogs’ Tooth (*Erythronium dens canis*), a bulbous flowering herb of the lily family called *qandiq* in Siberian Turkic, a term borrowed into Russian.<sup>33</sup> While this can be tentatively counted as another indigenous production, inspired perhaps by the brewing of birch sap, further information on its antiquity and distribution is lacking.

## G R A I N

Unlike the birch tree, which is a wild and native species, millet, the principal grain for brewing beer in southern Siberia was a very ancient domesticate imported from outside. In East Asia, agriculture began around 7000 BCE, and early on a division developed between the rice cultivation of the south and the drought-resistant millets in the north. Foxtail millet (*Setaria italica*) was the first, but whether it was domesticated locally or was an introduction is still debated. Whatever the answer, it was well adapted to northern climes from the Sungari in the east to the Gansu corridor in the west. Over time

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<sup>32</sup> Paul Devereux, *The Long Trip: A Prehistory of Psychedelia* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997), 64.

<sup>33</sup> V. V. Radlov, *Iz Sibiri: Stranitsy drevnika* (Moscow: Nauka, glavnaia redaktsiia vostochnoi literatury, 1989), 207, and M. Fasmer, *Etimologicheskii slovar russkogo iazyka*, 4 vols. (Moscow: Progress, 1971), II, 180.

its history becomes ever more complicated, as hybridization produced an ever-increasing number of millet sub-varieties.<sup>34</sup> And it is likely that this series of adaptations facilitated the successful introduction of millet into the challenging environmental conditions of Siberia.

Its early cultivation along the forest-steppe frontier is attested by the large number of millet seeds recovered from the Scythian kurgans of the Altai dating to the fourth century BCE; it is not clear, however, whether these were grown by the nomads or extracted from sedentary neighbors and subjects.<sup>35</sup> The inclusion of numerous millet seeds in burial sites continues into the succeeding Xiongnu period, the third century BCE to the third century CE.<sup>36</sup> As a grave good intended to sustain the deceased in the next world, its presence argues that it was the principal or preferred grain consumed in life. In any case, once established, millet proved to have great staying power, for it remained a favored crop of the inhabitants of Tuva, the Altai and the Yenisei basin until recent times.<sup>37</sup>

For the intervening centuries there is explicit literary evidence of its cultivation and uses in these same areas. According to the *New History of the Tang Dynasty (Xin Tangshu)*, completed in 1060, the Yenisei Qirghiz (Xia-jia-si) grew millet and other grains which they sowed in the third month and harvested in the ninth and from which they made an alcoholic drink (*jiu*).<sup>38</sup> While we do not know the Qirghiz name for this brew, it is later called *buza* by Turkic-speaking peoples, a term that became current during the Mongolian Empire and remains in use today.<sup>39</sup>

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34 Kwang-chih Chang, *The Archaeology of Ancient China*, 3rd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 94–95, 192, 196 and 289, and Francesca Bray, *Science and Civilization in China*, vol. VI, *Biology and Biological Technology*, pt. 2, *Agriculture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 10–15 and 434–48.

35 S. I. Rudenko, *Kul'tura naseleniia tsentral'nogo Altaia v skifskoe vremia* (Moscow-Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo akademii nauk SSSR, 1960), 200.

36 L. P. Potapov, ed., *Istoriia Tuva* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo nauka, 1964), 25.

37 Sev'yan I. Vainshtein, *Nomads of South Siberia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 146, 149–50, 155–57 and 162, and Douglas Carruthers, *Unknown Mongolia: A Record of Travel and Exploration in Northwest Mongolia and Dzungaria*, 2 vols. (repr. Delhi: Asian Educational Sources, 1994) I, 173, 183 and 189–90.

38 *Xin Tangshu*, ch. 217b, 6147. In Chinese *jiu* denotes any fermented beverage irrespective of base material.

39 Ibn Baṭṭūṭah, *The Travels of Ibn Baṭṭūṭah*, tr. H. A. R. Gibb, 4 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press for the

There are several plausible pathways by which millet penetrated central Siberia. In principle, it might have spread from Manchuria through the forest zone to the Yenisei since, as noted, millet was the founder crop of the North Asian Neolithic and therefore adaptable to natural conditions of that region. But it is equally possible that it entered some areas of Siberia through the steppe zone, since millet was the preferred crop of the nomads, one they regularly cultivated as a subsidiary branch of their pastoral economy.

To evaluate the likelihood of this option we need to briefly explore longer-term patterns in the relationship between steppe and forest. The first thing to be said is that their interaction was dynamic, intense and ancient. Evidence for this is available in the archaeological record and in historical linguistics. Most appropriate to our theme, there are variant terms for beer—*sör*, *sur*, *săra* and *sira*—found in Uralic and Turkic languages that can be connected with Old Indic *sura*, “fermented beverage.” There is, of course, no question of direct contact in this case; the word was borrowed through the agency of the Iranian-speaking people who dominated the early steppe.<sup>40</sup>

By the Middle Ages this interaction, often involving millet and other base materials, is reported in the literary sources. Two examples can be cited. In the late tenth century a branch of the Qay, presumed speakers of a Mongolian or para-Mongolian language living along the forest-steppe frontier in southwestern Manchuria, petitioned the Qitan rulers of the Liao Dynasty (907–1125) in 985 for assistance in harvesting their crop of glutinous millet (*shu*).<sup>41</sup> This particular variety, it is important to stress, was uniformly preferred by the inhabitants of North China and Manchuria for brewing beer. Next, according to Muslim geographers of the tenth to twelfth centuries, the Kimek, a decentralized confederation of Turkic-speaking nomads who dominated the central steppe, also cultivated a variety

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Hakuyt Society, 1958–94), II, 474, 475, 477, 485 and 499–500, and Bertold Laufer, “On the Possible Oriental Origin of Our Word Booze,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 49 (1929): 56–58. Its relationship to the English “booze” is uncertain.

<sup>40</sup> Margaret K. Palló, “The Bulghar-Turkish Loanwords of the Hungarian Language as Sources of Chuvash Prehistory,” in *Chuvash Studies*, ed. Róna-Tas, 110, and Alexander Lubotsky, “The Indo-Iranian Substratum” in *Early Contacts between Uralic and Indo-European: Linguistic and Archaeological Considerations*, ed. Christian Carpelan, Akso Parpola and Petteri Koskikallio (Helsinki: Suomalais-Ugriaininen Seura, 2001), 309.

<sup>41</sup> *Liaoshi* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), ch. 69, 1092, and Wolfram Eberhard, “Sinologische Bemerkungen über den Stamm der Kay,” *Monumenta Serica* 12 (1947): 213 and 215.

of cereals including millet (*tari*).<sup>42</sup> Other Muslim sources of the same period made special note that the Kimeks' authority extended into the "Northern Uninhabited Lands" between the Ob and Irtysh, that underground dwellings were common among its inhabitants and that sable and ermine fur were the principal commercial products of their lands.<sup>43</sup> Though never explicitly so stated in these texts, the available data leaves us in no doubt that these steppe nomads had regular contact with and extracted tributes from their forest subjects.

The extreme fluidity inherent in forest-steppe relations also entailed substantial migrations between the two zones. Such movements were in fact a recurrent and consequential feature of Eurasian history; after all, in the period between the eighth and eleventh centuries, the Mongols, originally a forest people from northwestern Manchuria, moved southward and became steppe nomads, while one branch of the Bulgharic Turks, long a force in the Pontic steppe, moved northward in several waves, becoming a forest people. Population shifts of this kind further explain why polities and ethnicities formed along this frontier sometimes had two branches, one identified with the forest and the other with the steppe, and why in some cases each branch spoke a different language.<sup>44</sup>

Under these conditions, the exchange of material and spiritual culture between the two ecological zones was not only frequent but inevitable. The extent and direction of these transfers is nicely illustrated in the case of mares' milk.

## ANIMAL MILK

Koumiss, from the Turkic *qimiz*, one of the most recent of the fermented drinks, first appeared in the western or central steppe in the course of the fourth or early third millennia BCE.<sup>45</sup> Its appearance was

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<sup>42</sup> Analyzed by B. E. Kumekov, *Gosudarstvo kimakov IX-XI vv. po arabskim istochnikam* (Alma Ata: Izdatel'stvo nauka kazakhskoi SSSR, 1972), 94.

<sup>43</sup> *Ḥudūd al-'Alam*, tr. Minorsky, 99; "Gardīzī," ed. Bartol'd, 26–27, Persian text, and 43–44, trans.; "Gardīzī," tr. Martinez, 120–21; and *Marvazī*, tr. Minorsky, \*19–20, Arab text, and 32, trans.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. the comments of Käthe Uray-Kóhalmi, "Tungusen in der *Geheimen Geschichte der Mongolen?*" *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 55 (2002): 252–63.

<sup>45</sup> Alan K. Outram et al., "The Earliest Horse Harnessing and Milking," *Science* (6 March 2009) 323: 1332–35.

a consequence of the “secondary products revolution” in which, according to good archaeological and zoological evidence, domesticated animals were increasingly exploited for renewable resources, wool, milk and traction, rather than meat, hides and bone.<sup>46</sup> Not unexpectedly, early literary sources on the steppe peoples were struck by their consumption of mares’ milk, which among neighboring sedentary peoples came to serve as their defining characteristic, a cultural marker and literary topoi that survived for centuries. While these sources make no explicit reference to its alcoholic content, this can be safely inferred, for mares’ milk ferments readily, and later historical and ethnographic data unanimously affirm that steppe nomads did not use mares’ milk for any other purpose.<sup>47</sup>

The date at which it reached the Siberian frontier is not known, but a strong circumstantial case can be made that koumiss was present among the Scythian pastoralists of the mountain Altai. Two arguments can be advanced in support of this conclusion: (1) during the period in question, the fourth to third centuries BCE, the drink was already widely diffused among the Pontic and Inner Asian nomads, and (2) there is physical evidence in the Pazyryk kurgans of dried curds of soured cows’ milk, which is used as a starter for koumiss, particularly in the forest zone.<sup>48</sup>

The later penetration of koumiss into the forest zone is documented in contemporary sources that offer a series of snapshots of the steps in its northward progress. The first stage is exemplified by the Kimek. Like other nomads based in the steppe, the exploitation of koumiss was an essential component of their subsistence strategy. In this case, the Muslim geographers consistently and correctly characterize their diet as consisting of horse milk, “which they call koumiss (*qimiz*)” during the summer, and dried meat in the winter.<sup>49</sup> Although there is no clear reference here to sharing the drink with their forest subjects, there can be little doubt that they did so, since nomadic techniques of

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46 Haskel J. Greenfield, “The Origins of Milk and Wool Production in the Old World,” *Current Anthropology* 29 (1988): 573–93 and 743–48, with invited commentary.

47 See, e.g., Radlov, *Iz Sibiri*, 283, and Ch. Ch. Valikhanov, *Sobranie sochineniia*, 5 vols. (Alma Ata: Glavnaia redaktsiia kazakhskoi sovetskoi entsiklopedii, 1984–85), V, 268.

48 Cf. the arguments of Rudenko, *Kul'tura naseleniia tsentral'nogo Altaia*, 203, and S. I. Rudenko, *Frozen Tombs of Siberia* (Berkeley: University of California, 1970), 35 and 61.

49 *Hudūd al-'Alam*, tr. Minorsky, 99–100; “Gardīzī,” ed. Bartol'd, 28, Persian text, and 45, trans.; “Gardīzī,” tr. Martinez, 123 and *Marvazī*, tr. Minorsky, \*19–20, Arabic text, and 32, trans.



governance, and most particularly those associated with the fashioning of tributary arrangements and political hierarchies, always entailed elaborate communal feasting, which was unthinkable without drinking ceremonies and large quantities of koumiss.

This is fully sustained by the Chinese sources of the same period that reveal a second stage in which these practices are assimilated by polities based *within* the forest zone. In the *New History of the Tang Dynasty* the ruler of the Yenisei Qirghiz and his senior officials are said "to live off meat and fermented horse milk (*malao*)."<sup>50</sup> Of equal significance, from time to time they made princely presentations to the Tang court that included pure white horses that were intimately associated with koumiss ceremonies throughout Inner Asia.<sup>51</sup> But it also deserves stressing that it was not only the elite who enjoyed the drink; its availability among the populace at large follows from the fact that when they decisively defeated the Uighurs in the steppe in 840, the Qirghiz possessed large cavalry forces, in one case reported to be 100,000 strong and in another 2,000.<sup>52</sup>

In the next phase, koumiss spread farther into the forest, where less-organized, peripheral people took up the practice. As a case in point, we are informed by the same source that while the Bila or O-lo-ji, who lived north of the Qirghiz, do not ride their horses, "they rely on mares' milk (*tonglao*) for drink."<sup>53</sup> If accurate, this presents an ethnographic anomaly, for peoples who regularly drink koumiss and raise horses in numbers also ride them. But while admittedly problematic as it stands, the passage nonetheless well conveys the notion that these people had not yet fully assimilated the equine culture of the steppe.

There is evidence, however, that over time other outlying forest folk, the Wu-si, the Us/Uruset, northern neighbors of the Yenisei Qirghiz, moved toward the next stage in which they more fully

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<sup>50</sup> *Xin Tangshu*, ch 217b, 6148.

<sup>51</sup> Michael R. Drompp, *Tang China and the Collapse of the Uighur Empire: A Documentary History* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 146, 294, 300 and 308, and Edward H. Schafer, *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand: A Study in Tang Exotics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), 64–65 and 69.

<sup>52</sup> *Xin Tangshu*, ch. 2017b, 6130, and Drompp, *Tang China and the Collapse of the Uighur Empire*, 37 and 277.

<sup>53</sup> *Xin Tangshu*, ch. 217b, 6146.

embraced the pastoral and dairying complex of the south.<sup>54</sup> The *History of the Yuan Dynasty* provides an informative passage on their traditions: “Every year during the first ten days of the sixth month it is their custom to sacrifice white horses, oxen and sheep and sprinkle [i.e., make a libation of] mares’ milk (*mazhong*).”<sup>55</sup> From this, it is obvious that koumiss was a central feature of their spiritual-ideological life, a topic addressed in a wider comparative perspective below.

The final and most arresting stage in this transference are the Yakuts, who brought the dairying culture of the steppe into the tundra. Starting before or perhaps during the rise of the Mongols, these Turkic-speaking pastoralists migrated in a number of waves from the vicinity of Baikal into the Lena basin; here they became politically dominant, subjugating and assimilating a number of indigenous people. Remarkably, the dramatic change in environment did not weaken their commitment to milk products—sour milk, yoghurt, curds and koumiss—which has continued down to the present.<sup>56</sup> And despite the high mortality rates among their animals, the Yakuts maintained large horse herds, usually about forty percent of the total, and thus had a steady supply of mares’ milk.<sup>57</sup> For the preparation of koumiss they used either old koumiss or sour cows’ milk as a ferment. The southern connections of their technique are affirmed by several key terms in Yakut that are Mongolian in origin.<sup>58</sup> As additional proof that the Yakuts steadfastly adhered to their pastoral practices of an earlier age, they call March the “[Month of] Foal Catching,” that is, the time for milking mares, an activity appropriate to steppe climatic conditions but certainly not to those of the Lena.<sup>59</sup>

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54 For indications of their location, see Rashīd al-Dīn ed. Alizade, I/1 239–40.

55 *Yuanshi*, ch. 63, 1574, and Francis W. Cleaves, “Qabqanas—Qamqanas,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 19 (1956), 401.

56 Okladnikov, *Yakutia* (1970), 241–42; Peter Dobell, *Travels in Kamchatka and Siberia*, 3 vols. (London: Colburn and Bentley, 1830), I, 306 and 342–43, and II, 37 and 39–40; and I. W. Shklovsky, *In Far Northeast Siberia* (London: MacMillan, 1916), 54–55.

57 V. F. Ivanov, *Sotsial’no-ekonomicheskie otnosheniia v Iakutii (konets XVII-nachalo XIX v.* (Novosibirsk: VO nauka, 1992), 16–23.

58 Jochelson, “Koumiss Festivals of the Yakut,” 259–61, and S. A. Ivanov, “Sledy mongol’skogo iazykovogo vliianiia v gororakh iakutskogo iazyka,” in *Etnokul’turnye protessy v Iugo-Vostochnoi Sibiri v srednie veka* ed. Mikhailov, 162.

59 Okladnikov, *Yakutia*, 234.

For the Yakuts, koumiss was not only an important food but also a sacred beverage employed in libations to the gods during the Ysyakh festival held several times a year. According to their traditions, the festival was thought to be ancient, a means for demonstrating reverence for the creator Ayi and for warding off evil, attracting good fortune and assuring prosperity.<sup>60</sup>

Since the festival was sponsored by leaders and the wealthy and brought together lineages, extended families, clients and retainers, its celebration facilitated collective identity and activity. Later legends concerning the political struggles of Yakut leaders on the eve of the Russian conquest, late sixteenth to early seventeenth century, relate that Ysyakh festivals were regularly mounted for political ends, to attract followers and to lure and eliminate rivals. In these competitions, the most generous are always depicted as the inevitable and the legitimate victors.<sup>61</sup>

These, of course, are the very same methods of political mobilization found in the steppe zone, where the celebration of milk in the form of koumiss conveyed important ideological messages. For the Mongols, the color white not only symbolized good fortune (*su*)—all white objects, when subjected to proper rituals, created and thereby increased the store of such luck for individuals and their communities. The association between milk, fertility and prosperity, so central in Mongolian folk belief, was part of a wider cultural complex that embraced the eastern steppe and the adjacent forest zones. Their shared beliefs are clearly manifested in the koumiss festivals, the sacrifice of white animals and the mythologies of forest peoples. In the myths preserved by the South Siberian Turks there is an unmistakable equation between the fertility of humans and animals, good fortune (*qut*) and milk, sometimes in the form of koumiss and at other times in the form of a "Milk Lake," a place of plenty, on the shores of which resides the earth goddess Umai, a deity common to the Turks and Mongols.<sup>62</sup> Clearly, when steppe peoples introduced this new drink into the forest zone it was

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60 This composite picture draws on E. N. Romanova, *Iakutskii prazdnik ysyakh: Itogi i predstavleniia* (Novosibirsk: VO nauka, 1994), 82 ff. and 115 ff.; Okladnikov, *Yakutia*, 241–42, 258, 355, 394, 398 (fig. 82), 409 and 435; Jochelson, "Kumiss Festivals of the Yakut," 263–66; Jochelson, *The Yakut*, 197–205; and S. V. Ivanov, "Iakutskie konoviazii," in *Material'naiia kul'tura narodov Sibiri i Severa*, ed. I. S. Vdovin (Leningrad: Nauka, 1976), 220.

61 A. I. Gogolov, "Skifo-sibirskie istoki traditsionnoi kul'tury Iakutov" in *Skifo-sibirskii mir: Iskusstva i ideologiia* (Novosibirsk: Nauka, sibirskoe otdelenie, 1987), 144, and Okladnikov, *Yakutia*, 423–25, 428 and 431.

62 E. L. L'vova, I. V. Oktiabr'skaia, A. M. Sagalaev and M. S. Usmanova, *Traditsionnoe mirovozzrenie tiurkov Iuzhnoi Sibiri*

accompanied by extensive ideological baggage, which survived, flourished and diffused in its new home.

It is particularly noteworthy that these beliefs, transmitted through the oral folk traditions, further constituted the basic raw material for the construction and articulation of broader-based political messages and doctrines. In this regard the rise of the Chinggisids provides an unmistakable example of such reworking, since good fortune (*su*) became a central component of their imperial ideology, their claims of legitimacy and their ability to attract support from other peoples with similar folk beliefs, including those of the forest zone.

To close this section, the matter of reindeer and the utilization of their milk deserve brief consideration. The domestication of the reindeer is a comparatively recent phenomenon. From Chinese sources it appears this began in the early centuries CE in the forest zone around Baikal as a result of stimulus diffusion, the imitation of the herding practices of steppe nomads.<sup>63</sup> Farther to the north, a more extensive and intensive form of reindeer nomadism spread across the tundra between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, a period which coincides with the Russian entry into the region.<sup>64</sup> The systematic exploitation of their milk was not, however, an integral part of the emergence or subsequent expansion of reindeer nomadism. From a number of observations there is every reason to believe that reindeer breeders across northern Eurasia did not generally milk their animals unless

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(Novosibirsk: Nauka, sibirskoe otdelenie, 1989, 74–77; G. V. Dluzhnevskaiia, “Eshche raz o ‘kudyrinskom valune’ (k voprosy ob ikonografii Umai y drevnikh Tiurkov)” in *Tiurkologicheskii sbornik 1974* (Moscow: Nauka, 1978), 230–38; and Uno Harva, *Der religiösen Vorstellungen der altaischen Völker* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakademia, 1938), 85–89.

63 For an analysis of the Chinese references, see Bertold Laufer, *The Reindeer and Its Domestication*, Memoirs of the American Anthropological Association, vol. 4, no. 2 (Lancaster, PA, 1917): 105–139.

64 I. I. Krupnik, *Articheskaiia etnoekologiia: Modely traditsionnogo prirodaopol'zovananiia morskikh okhotnikov i olenevodov Severnoi Evrazii* (Moscow: Nauka, 1989), 146 ff., and Juliet Clutton-Brock, *A Natural History of Domesticated Mammals* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989), 130–34. Arguments for an earlier transition to reindeer nomadism in the Tundra have been proposed by Sev'yan I. Vainshtein, “One of the Origins of Nomadism,” in *Ecology and Empire: Nomads in the Cultural Evolution of the Old World*, ed. Gary Seaman (Los Angeles: Ethnographics/USC, 1989), 75–79.

stimulated to do so by neighbors who milked other species; instances of such emulation is found in the Scandinavians' influence on the Lapps and that of the Mongols on the Sayan Tungus.<sup>65</sup>

The operation of this kind of influence is documented in the *History of the Yuan Dynasty*, which reports that the Han-he-na, the Qamqanas/Qabqanas, neighbors of the horse breeding Us/Uruset, made extensive use of reindeer ("white deer" in Chinese) as pack animals, and that their milk formed a prominent part of their diet.<sup>66</sup> Reasoning by analogy, one might then further infer that since their Us neighbors consumed koumiss, the Qamqanas had a model for both the extraction and the fermentation of reindeer milk. However, the Chinese word for milk in this passage, *ru*, regularly denotes the unprocessed, unfermented varieties of human and animal milk, and this tends to undermine such a conclusion. So far as I am aware, the few references to reindeer koumiss all date from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and this seems to indicate its sporadic use and limited development.<sup>67</sup>

In sum, while much about this issue remains uncertain, one conclusion seems self-evident: even among those herders who milked their reindeer, the consumption of its fermented forms, in sharp contrast with the situation in the steppe, was rarely a crucial element in their subsistence strategies or central to their spiritual-ceremonial life.

## HONEY

Mead, arguably, is the first alcoholic beverage made by humans, because honey, around seventy-five percent sugar, regularly ferments under natural conditions. Interestingly, Jordanes, writing in 501 CE, deplores the absence of the honey bee in the far north.<sup>68</sup> Like the absence of the vine, this too was a signpost in the Mediterranean world of a harsh climate and a backward, incomplete economy.

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65 Tim Ingold, *Hunters, Pastoralists, and Ranchers: Reindeer Economics and Their Transformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 101–03; Carruthers, *Unknown Mongolia*, I, 220, and S. M. Shirokogoroff, *Social Organization of the Northern Tungus* (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1933), 32.

66 *Yuanshi*, ch. 63, 1574, and Cleaves, "Qabqanas—Qamqanas," 401.

67 For an example, see Carruthers, *Unknown Mongolia*, I, 226.

68 Jordanes, *The Gothic History*, tr. Christopher Mierow (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1915), 55–56.

The earliest mention of honey wine in Siberia comes in 1581 when the invading Russian forces encountered a close associate of Küchüm, the ruler of the Siberian Qanate, near the confluence of the Tobol and Irtysh and seized in his hurriedly abandoned encampment a supply of “the qan’s mead.”<sup>69</sup> Its presence in western Siberia at this time is further attested in a Turkic historical poem, in which another of Küchüm’s servitors nostalgically recalls his delight in drinking mead (*bal*).<sup>70</sup> These references raise the question of its source: was it locally produced or imported?

The problem of apiculture in Siberia is complex and long debated, since the question of its geographical distribution played a pivotal role in controversies surrounding the ancient homelands of the Magyars and other Uralic people.<sup>71</sup> One of the earliest pronouncements on the subject is by the English traveler Tooke, who in the 1790s states unequivocally that there are no honey bees (*Apis mellifera*) east of the Urals.<sup>72</sup> Although some nineteenth-century observers note “wild swarms” in the forests of the Altai region and beekeeping in its native villages, these are likely later Russian introductions. This, in any event, was the view of the native informants queried by the noted Russian Turkologist Radlov in the 1860s; in response they stated quite forcefully “that earlier there were no bees in the Altai and the Russians alone imported them and thereafter many swarms became wild and their numbers increased immensely.”<sup>73</sup> If accurate, as seems very probable, this is a case of “feral” honey bees successfully adapting to conditions of the southernmost forests of Siberia. This, however, clearly represented the northernmost limits of their human-induced colonization of Siberia, for later attempts to introduce apiculture along the forest-tundra frontier failed miserably.<sup>74</sup>

Still, there are reports that Ob-Ugrians, the Ostyaks/Khanti and Voguls/Mansi, sometime

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69 Basil Dmytryshyn, E. A. P. Crownhart-Vaughan and Thomas Vaughan, eds. and trs., *Russia’s Conquest of Siberia*, vol. I, *A Documentary Record, 1558–1700* (Portland, OR: Western Imprints, 1985), 48 and 71.

70 Nora K. Chadwick and Victor Zhirmunsky, *Oral Epics of Central Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 65.

71 Vuorela, *Finno-Ugric Peoples*, 9–10, and István Fodor, *In Search of a New Homeland: The Prehistory of the Hungarian People and the Conquest* (Gyomas: Corvina Kiadó, 1975), 49–50.

72 Tooke, *View of the Russian Empire*, III, 272.

73 Radlov, *Iz Sibiri*, 51, 210, 215–17 and 221, direct quote from 217.

74 Jochelson, *The Yakut*, 191.

clients of the Qanate of Sibir, harvested honey from wild bees in the southern part of their range.<sup>75</sup> While certainly conceivable, this suggests emulation of the apiculture practiced on the western side of the Urals, and in its turn this points to another and even more likely origin of the mead consumed in the territory of the Siberian Tatars.

The Volga-Kama region was in fact one of the most ancient and productive centers of apiculture in all of Eurasia. Beginning about 2000 BCE its Finno-Ugrian inhabitants developed what is usually called "forest beekeeping," *bortnichestvo* in Russian, a form of apiculture intermediate between honey hunting and beekeeping in moveable hives. As a first step, this entails making an artificial hollow (*bort*) in a living tree near a source of pollen attractive to bees. Once a hive is formed, ownership marks are inscribed and stakes and collars installed on the tree to deter bears. The keepers in season then climb rope ladders to harvest the honey.<sup>76</sup>

The vocabulary surrounding forest beekeeping has also attracted much attention. The current consensus, with ongoing debate over details, is that the Proto-Finno-Ugric *\*mete*, "honey," is borrowed from the Indo-European *medhu*. Similar origins have been proposed for the words for bee and beeswax.<sup>77</sup> Once again, evidence from historical linguistics indicates that the relations between forest, steppe and agricultural peoples were ancient and extensive, and they often involved psychoactive substances. Additionally, the linguistic evidence tells us something else of importance: the fact that in the Slavic, Turkic, Mongolian and Finno-Ugric languages a single word (*med*, *bal*, etc.) is used for both honey and mead, suggests these diverse and widely dispersed ethno-linguistic groups shared a common notion that the principal and proper use of honey was the production of alcoholic beverage.

By the Middle Ages the great economic importance of forest beekeeping is increasingly evident. The Muslim, Byzantine and Old Russian sources uniformly assert that, of the northern goods, composed predominantly of animal products, those most in demand in the south were furs, slaves,

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<sup>75</sup> Forsyth, *History of the Peoples of Siberia*, 13.

<sup>76</sup> For details, see Eva Crane, *The Archaeology of Beekeeping* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 77–86, and R. G. Kuzeev, *Narody Srednego Povolzh'ia i Iuzhnogo Urala: Etnogeneticheskii vzgliad na istoriiu* (Moscow: Nauka, 1992), 30–31.

<sup>77</sup> Christian Carpelan and Akso Parpola, "Emergence, Contacts and Dispersals of Proto-Indo-European, Proto-Uralic and Proto-Aryan in Archaeological Perspective," in *Early Contact between Uralic and Indo-European*, ed. Carpelan et al., 114–26 and 131.

beeswax and honey.<sup>78</sup> The trade in the last also moved eastward through low-lying passes located in the central and southern Urals. The nexus of this traffic was Ugría or Yura, a territory mentioned in the Russian and Muslim sources in the pre-Mongolian era. This toponym designated a large but ill-defined tract of territory on both sides of the central Urals inhabited mainly by Ob-Ugrians who were deeply involved in the fur trade with the Volga Bulgars, Novgorod and the eastern Islamic lands.<sup>79</sup> That these exchanges also included mead is apparent from the testimony of Gharnaṭī, a mid-twelfth century Muslim traveler, who reports that honey was gathered in the forests of Yura; whether this activity was confined to the western side of the Urals or whether it constitutes further evidence of apicultural “seepage” into Siberia, cannot be determined with the data on hand.<sup>80</sup>

In any case, by the latter half of the sixteenth century, as the Russian advance eastward gained momentum, there was in place an extended and well established web of trade and tributary relations involving Moscow, Kazan, Ugría, the Bashkirs and Votyaks (Udmurts), all of whom produced ample supplies of honey.<sup>81</sup> The Siberian Qanate, in short, had ready access to much mead and/or honey, and the reason they eagerly exploited these sources can be traced back to the high status that honey wine enjoyed at the court of the Golden Horde centered in the lower Volga basin. Here in the fourteenth century it was the prestige drink, one bestowed lavishly on favored retainers and honored guests and

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78 Janet Martin, *Treasure of the Land of Darkness: The Fur Trade and Its Significance for Medieval Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 6–7, 10, 12–14, 22 and 39, and N. Makarov, “Traders in the Northern Forest: The Periphery of Rus’ in the Medieval Trade Network,” in *Pre-Modern Russia and Its World: Essays in Honor of Thomas S. Noonan*, ed. Kathryn L. Reyerson, Theofanis G. Stavrou and James D. Tracy (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2006), 116.

79 István Vásáry, “The ‘Ugría’ Problem,” in *Chuvash Studies*, ed. Roná-Tas, 249–53.

80 Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone, trs., *Ibn Faḍlān and the Land of Darkness: Arab Travelers in the Far North* (London: Penguin Classics, 2012), 71.

81 Raymond H. Fisher, *The Russian Fur Trade, 1550–1700* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1943), 9–16; N. A. Mazhitov, *Iuzhnyi Ural v XII-XIV vv.* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo nauka, 1977), 159; *Kazanskaia istoriia in Pamiatniki literatury drevnei Rusi: Seredina XVI veka*, ed. L. A. Dmitrieva and D. S. Likhachev (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1985), 302, 303, 314 and 315; Robert Craig Howes, Jr., tr., *The Testaments of the Grand Princes of Moscow* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), 168 and 345; and J. L. I. Fennell, tr., *Kurb'sky's History of Ivan IV* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 50 and 51.



one used in solemn ceremonies to affirm hierarchy and loyalty.<sup>82</sup> The same can be said of its ritual and political uses in the Horde's dynastic successor east of the Urals, the Shaybanid (Uzbek) Qanate founded by Abū'l Khayr (r. 1428–68).<sup>83</sup> In light of these practices and precedents, it occasions no surprise that the later Siberian Qanate also embraced mead as a courtly drink.

Finally and more generally, the preferences exhibited in the above cases are in complete accord with a basic principle governing the distribution of alcoholic beverages all along the forest-steppe frontier: the drinking cultures formed here are heavily influenced by the patterns of alcohol production and consumption of neighboring peoples.<sup>84</sup>

## DISTILLED ALCOHOL

The early history of distilled forms of alcohol is extremely obscure, and there are very good reasons for this state of affairs: the available data is scarce, much of it encoded in the arcane language of alchemy, and the evolution of the technology itself is rooted in the manufacture of other products—perfume, mercury, camphor, turpentine, among many others.<sup>85</sup> This, of course, presents a further set of challenges, since the technology's multiple applications mean that the recovery of early distilling apparatus does not necessarily provide evidence for the production or consumption of hard liquor.

For our immediate ends it is sufficient to note that distilled alcohol as a social drink is first attested in India in the first centuries of the Common Era and then in southwest China under the Tang. In the pre-Mongolian period, clear references to distilled drinks are very rare, but by the fourteenth century they had become increasingly common. The obvious conclusion to be drawn is that the Chinggisids had a major hand in the demonstration and dissemination of this potent new beverage and its associated technology throughout North and Inner Asia.

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82 Ibn Baṭṭūṭah tr. Gibb, II, 495–96.

83 Valikhanov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, I, 232.

84 On this theme, see Thomas T. Allsen, "The Qipchaqs, an Alcohol History, 900–1400" in *Central Eurasia in the Middle Ages: Studies in Honour of Peter B. Golden*, ed. István Zimonyi and Osman Karatay (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2016), 11–22.

85 S. A. M. Adshead, *China in World History* (London: MacMillan, 1988), 227–28.

In Mongolian, hard liquor is called *ariki/arkhi*, a term initially applied to the distilled form of koumiss first made in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century. Its name derives from the Arabic *‘araq*, “sweat” or “steam” and by extension the “inner essence” of any substance extracted by distillation. It seems likely the Mongols adopted this terminology from Muslim specialists attached to the Yuan court who prepared sherbet, a drink that regularly contained rose water, a non-alcoholic distillate called *gulāb* (our julep), or *‘araq-i gul* in Persian.<sup>86</sup> While there is no explicit proof of this, it is easy to imagine that Mongols would be exceedingly interested in tasting and experiencing the effects of koumiss that was so “enhanced.”

The evidence of the subsequent diffusion of the technology to Siberia is both historical and linguistic. To start with the former, in 1647 Tungus informants told visiting Russian envoys that the ruling house of the nearby Daghurs (Daur) had “grains of all kinds, *vino* [and] *arak*.”<sup>87</sup> Though brief, this passage conveys much useful information when subjected to more detailed examination.

First of all, its vocabulary has much to offer. Although the meaning of foreign words borrowed into new languages is often distorted, this, the earliest attestation of *arak* in a Russian text, admits of no such ambiguity: the term unmistakably denotes distilled liquor. The word *vino*, on the other hand, has been subject to considerable variation. When introduced into Old Russian literature in the eleventh century it meant “grape” or “grape wine,” but in the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it became the common designation for vodka and other forms of distilled spirits.<sup>88</sup> Since the passage in question clearly connects *vino* with the agricultural resources of the Daghurs, we can conclude that in this specific context it designates alcohol distilled from grain, while *arak* refers to that distilled from mares’ milk.

The geographical and political relationships of the two ethnic groups mentioned in the text are also instructive. At this point in time, the Daghur, who spoke an archaic dialect of Mongolian, were located in the region of the upper Amur and Shilka rivers and exercised a loose control over

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86 On the career of one such *she-li-ba-chi*, “sherbet-maker,” in China, see Louis Ligeti, “Les sept monastères nestoriens de Mar Sarghis,” *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 26 (1972): 169–78.

87 Dmytryshyn et al., trs. *Russian Conquest of Siberia*, 232.

88 *Slovar russkogo iazyka*, II, 183.

neighboring Tungus populations, who were therefore well positioned to impart accurate information on the food and drink preferences of their sometime rulers. To the east, the Daghurs' immediate neighbors were the Diuchers or Jürchens, for the most part settled agriculturalists, who in turn had intimate ethnic and cultural affinities with the Manchus further to the south.<sup>89</sup>

Next, there is additional and equally informative linguistic evidence bearing on the problem. To start with the basics, the Tungus and Manchu terms for distilled alcohol unquestionably derive from the Mongolian forms.<sup>90</sup> Furthermore, there are reliable guidelines regarding the chronology of the terms' northward spread; in a Sino-Jürchen vocabulary compiled during the Ming and dating to the first half of the sixteenth century, there is an entry for the Jürchen or Old Manchu *arki*, transcribed as a-er-qi, that is defined there by the Chinese shaojiu, lit. "wine that burns" or "distilled alcohol."<sup>91</sup>

Collectively, this body of data suggests the following pathway for the diffusion of distilled alcohol into Siberia. The starting point is southern and central Manchuria. Distilled alcohol appears there during the period of Yuan rule or perhaps under the early Ming, which also had extensive political and tributary relations with the Jürchens. In any event, their descendants, the Manchus, were distilling shanyan arki, "white liquor," from sorghum and millet during their pre-imperial era.<sup>92</sup> From there the drink and its technology spread through the forest zone to the peoples of the upper Amur basin. Chronologically, this means that the new drink, using grain and mares' milk as the base materials, was already well established among the Tungus-speaking clients of the Daghurs a century or more before the Russians arrived in eastern Siberia "in the middle of the seventeenth century."

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89 Juha Janhunen, *Manchuria, an Ethnic History* (Helsinki: The Finno-Ugrian Society, 1996), 50–52, 101–06 and 120.

90 William Rozcyski, *Mongol Elements in Manchu* (Indiana University Uralic and Altaic Series, no. 157; Bloomington, 1994), 21, and V. I. Tsintsius, ed., *Sravnitel'nyi slovar Tunguso-man'chzhurskim iazykov*, 2 vols. (Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo nauka, 1975–77), I, 48.

91 Daniel Kane, tr., *The Sino-Jurchen Vocabulary of the Bureau of Interpreters* (Indiana University Uralic and Altaic Series, no. 153; Bloomington, 1989), 129 and 343 (#1029). On its date, see Paul Pelliot, "Le Hōja et le Sayyid Husain de l'histoire des Ming," *T'oung-pao* 38/2–5 (1948): 281–84.

92 Alessandra Pozzi, "A Birthday Banquet for Our Guest of Honour Professor Denis Sinor à la mode of the Ancestors of [the] Manchu People," in *Florilegia Altaistica: Studies in Honour of Denis Sinor on the Occasion of His goth Birthday*, ed. Elena V. Boikova (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2006), 115.

The next question is, how far northward did it diffuse? The general consensus is that distillation did not reach the tundra prior to the Russians. All seventeenth- and eighteenth-century observers insist that while the Yakuts distilled koumiss in their day, they had no knowledge of the technique before the conquest.<sup>93</sup> This of course is a natural supposition, and certainly these conclusions are warranted when applied to more northerly peoples, Kamchadals, Koryaks and others.<sup>94</sup> But the diffusion of this technology into the tundra may be more complicated than it first appears. There are two reasons for this: first—as is always the case—proving negatives is inconclusive at best, and second, the principal Yakut term for hard liquor, *arigi*, is obviously of Mongolian, not of Russian, origin.<sup>95</sup> And such a borrowing strongly implies that the Yakuts had some exposure to the distilled varieties before Russian contact, most likely as a result of trade relations with forest people to their south.

Here, as is true of the diffusion of hard liquor elsewhere in Eurasia, acquisition of the means of production regularly follows the acceptance of the product, a process that was much facilitated by the progressive simplification and consequent accessibility of the distilling apparatus among smaller, more dispersed communities, ethnicities and polities.

Finally, to place the historical and linguistic evidence in a wider comparative perspective, *ariki* and its variants constitute a classic example of a *Wanderwort*. More specifically and revealingly, it has a number of analogues among stimulants that are also ingested in liquid form—mead, tea and coffee—all of which retained their original names during their continental and worldwide dispersals. In the case of *ariki*, the word, always meaning hard liquor, was by the time of its first appearance in a Russian text already regularly encountered in South and Southeast Asia, the eastern Islamic lands and Europe.<sup>96</sup> Clearly, the pathways of its dissemination were many and varied, including those that

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<sup>93</sup> See, e.g., Stephen D. Watrous, ed., *John Ledyard's Journey through Russia and Siberia, 1787–88: The Journal and Selected Letters* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), 173.

<sup>94</sup> Krashenninikov, *Explorations of Kamchatka*, 111, 113, 227–28, 322 and 327–28, and Waldemar Bogoras, *The Jessup North Pacific Expedition*, vol. VII, *The Chukchee* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1904–09), 208.

<sup>95</sup> Okladnikov, *Yakutia*, 242.

<sup>96</sup> See *Slovar russkogo iazyka*, I, 44, for early Russian references, and Sir Henry Yule and A. C. Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson: A*

passed through the steppe zone. Just such a routing is suggested by the Turkic historical poem in which a retainer of Küchüm relates his fondness for distilled drink.<sup>97</sup> The chronologies transmitted in oral history are of course subject to suspicion since they frequently compress time, bundle together discrete events, and introduce anachronisms, often in the form of "updates" for each new generation. But despite these limitations, relative chronologies can be reconstructed with some accuracy, especially when correlated with other independent sources.<sup>98</sup> There is, then, nothing inherently improbable about the specific claim made in this historical poem about the presence of hard liquor in western Siberia. *Ariki* began to penetrate Inner Asia in the early decades of the fourteenth century and could well have reached the Qanate of Sibir by Küchüm's day.<sup>99</sup> In this particular instance an immediate and viable source of supply can be identified, for it is during this very period that the qanate established well-documented political-commercial ties to Bukhara, one of the known producers of distilled liquor in Turkestan.<sup>100</sup>

## CONCLUSION

At whatever date alcohol first reached Siberia, it entered a zone in which drugs were the chief psychoactive substances in play. Sources of the post-Russian period offer clear evidence of the prevalence of narcotics there, most notably fly agaric.<sup>101</sup> This, of course, invites comparison with the situation in the pre-Columbian New World, where the territory roughly corresponding to modern

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*Glossary of Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases* (London: John Murray, 1903), 36–37, for Asian and European languages.

<sup>97</sup> Chadwick and Zhirmunsky, *Oral Epics of Central Asia*, 65.

<sup>98</sup> The best introduction to these problems is Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 23–24, 54, 56, 117, 148, 168–69 and 173–85.

<sup>99</sup> For a preliminary sketch, See Thomas T. Allsen, "Ever Closer Encounters: The Appropriation of Culture and the Apportionment of People in the Mongol Empire," *Journal of Early Modern History* 1 (1997): 13–15.

<sup>100</sup> R. G. Mukminova, *Ocherki po istorii remesla v Samarkande i Bukhare v XVI veke* (Tashkent: Izdatel'stvo Fan, 1976), 144.

<sup>101</sup> Bernát Munkácsi, "Pilz' und 'Rausch'," *Keleti Szemle* 8 (1907), 343–44; Eliade, *Shamanism*, 400–01, and N. V. Lukina, "Traditsii prigotovleniia pishchi y vostochnykh Khantov in *Uralo-altaistika: Arkheologiya, etnografiya, iazyk*, ed. E. I. Ubratova (Novosibirsk: Izdatel'stvo nauka, sibirskoe otdelenie, 1985), 130.

America and Canada was truly an alcohol-free zone in which peyote and similar stimulants dominated.<sup>102</sup>

While the similarities are undeniable, the differences between the two are equally obvious and equally notable: when Europeans arrived in North America, the indigenous populations had no prior engagement with alcohol, while those in Siberia, at least in the forest zone, had centuries of experience. This in turn prompts an intriguing question: did the Siberians thereby enjoy an adaptive advantage because of their experience, and did the Amerindians suffer greater harm because of their lack?

The reflexive answer, of course, is that Siberians were better prepared to deal with the challenges posed by the introduced forms of alcohol.

On further consideration, however, it is also possible to argue the reverse, that their previous experience made them all the more susceptible and vulnerable to its allures. This is because most of their native drinks were seasonal and of low-alcoholic content, and they were therefore accustomed to engaging in sustained drinking bouts whenever the opportunity presented itself. As is true of many pre-modern societies, especially in northern climes, binge eating and drinking to gain weight for the inevitable lean times was an age-old and highly successful survival strategy. Consequently, with the arrival of plentiful and far more potent year-round supplies of alcohol, Siberian peoples were extremely susceptible to excessive consumption and its many consequences. Most certainly, the Russians made extensive use of alcohol, particularly its distilled forms, in their political and commercial dealings with native peoples and did so from the early days of the conquest into the 1920s, the early Soviet period.<sup>103</sup> The devastating effects of this kind of exploitation are clearly evidenced by the fact that the imperial Russian government soon recognized the problem and repeatedly banned such traffic, all which proved ineffective.<sup>104</sup>

But in assessing the dire consequences of its introduction for Siberia or for North America, it

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<sup>102</sup> Henry J. Bruman, *Alcohol in Ancient Mexico* (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2000), 7–11.

<sup>103</sup> Thomas Wallace Knox, *Overland through Asia: Pictures of Siberian, Tartar and Chinese Life* (repr. Charleston, SC: Bibliobazar, 2008), 156; Bogoras, *The Chukchee*, 60–61 and 207–08; and Shklovsky, *In Far Northeast Siberia*, 7–8, 13, 89, etc.

<sup>104</sup> Forsyth, *History of the Peoples of Siberia*, 160–61, 185, 243, 262 and 264.

should also be kept in mind that the popularization of distilled alcohol was part of a larger package of psychoactive substances—coffee, tea, sugar, cocoa, tobacco, cannabis and opium—that steadily diffused around the world after 1500.<sup>105</sup>

The global context of the spread of distilled liquor throughout the interior of Eurasia is a topic I hope to address in a future study.

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<sup>105</sup> For differing perspectives on the integrated character of their diffusion, see Rudi Matthee, "Exotic Substances and the Global Spread of Tobacco, Coffee, Cocoa, Tea and Distilled Liquor, Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries" in *Drugs and Narcotics in History*, ed. Ray Porter and Mikuláš Teich (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 24–51; David T. Courtwright, "Mr. ATOD's Wild Ride: What Do Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drugs Have in Common?," *The Social History of Alcohol and Drugs: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 20 (2005): 105–40 with invited discussion; and Frank Dikötter, Lars Laamann and Zhou Xun, *Narcotic Culture: A History of Drugs in China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 10–16.

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