

And Behold, a White Horse . . .

Observations on the Colors of the Horses of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

HELMUT NICKEL

Curator of Arms and Armor, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

“AND I SAW when the Lamb opened one of the seals, and I heard, as it were the noise of thunder, one of the four beasts saying, Come and see.

2. And I saw, and behold, a white horse: and he that sat on him had a bow; and a crown was given unto him: and he went forth conquering, and to conquer.

3. And when he had opened the second seal, I heard the second beast say, Come and see.

4. And there went out another horse that was red: and power was given to him that sat thereon to take peace from the earth, and that they should kill one another: and there was given unto him a great sword.

5. And when he had opened the third seal, I heard the third beast say, Come and see. And I beheld, and

lo, a black horse; and he that sat on him had a pair of balances in his hand.

6. And I heard a voice in the midst of the four beasts say, A measure of wheat for a penny, and three measures of barley for a penny; and see thou hurt not the oil and the wine.

7. And when he had opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth beast say, Come and see.

8. And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth.”

(Revelation 6:1–8)

THOUGH THE REVELATION of St. John is certainly the most thoroughly studied and exhaustingly interpreted single work in the world's literature, the detail of the color of the mounts of the Four Horsemen has received scant attention, in spite of the fact that the Vision of the Four Horsemen is one of the best known elements of the Apocalypse.

The four colors were generally accepted as means of identifying the individual riders, equivalent to the iconographical color scheme that serves for the three knightly saints, George, Theodore, and Demetrius: white horse for St. George, black horse for St. Theodore, and red horse for St. Demetrius. They also could indicate the characteristics of the apocalyptic horsemen. Thus, the crowned first horseman rides a white

horse, a color usually associated with a royal steed; the sword-wielding second horseman spurs a red horse, the color of blood; the third horseman with the scales of famine¹ sits on a gloomily black horse, and Death, the fourth horseman, comes astride a pale horse, the color of decay (Figures 1–4).² There is, however, reason to believe that the colors of the four horses were influenced by a cultural complex from beyond the confines of the Mediterranean world.

In chapter 99 of the early Chinese chronicle *Ts'ien*

1. For a different interpretation, Anna Maria Cetto, “Der Dritte Apokalyptische Reiter,” *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 9 (1974) pp. 203–210.

2. Strongly expressed in Luther's translation “ein fahl Pferd”; *fahl* meaning “bleached out, withered (as of leaves or grass).”



FIGURE 1
 “Et ecce equus albus”; the First Horseman on the white horse. Fol 7v, *The Cloisters Apocalypse*, French (Normandy), first quarter of the 14th century. The Cloisters Collection, 68.174



FIGURE 2
 “Et exiuit alius equus rufus”; the Second Horseman on the red horse. *The Cloisters Apocalypse*, fol. 8r

Han shu,³ there is a report about the “Generals in Charge of the Enforcement of Imperial Power in the Five Directions of the World” who were sent out in the Christian year 9 to collect from all officials the obsolete seals of the old Han dynasty, and to issue new seals in the name of the new emperor, Wang Mang. The five generals were spectacularly outfitted for the occasion, with a military escort of five cohorts equipped thus: the vanguard was dressed in red and rode red horses, the rear guard was in black on black horses, the left wing was garbed in blue and mounted on grays, the right wing was in white on white horses, and the center column had yellow uniforms and rode yellow horses. These five colors correspond to the five cardinal directions of Chinese cosmology: red for the South, black for the North, blue for the East, white for the West, and yellow for the Center.⁴ Harmony with the universe was the underlying principle and paramount concern of Chi-

3. J. J. M. de Groot, *Die Hunnen der vorchristlichen Zeit*, Vol. 1, *Chinesische Urkunden zur Geschichte Asiens* (Berlin/Leipzig, 1921) p. 268.

4. The same complex of colors connected with the cardinal directions is to be found in the New World, though the distribution of the colors is different. In pre-Columbian Mexico, for instance,

nese civilization. Thus, the emperor seated on his throne faced south, where the sun was brightest and highest in the heaven. Consequently, the South was considered to be the foremost of the cardinal directions, and therefore the vanguard of the “Generals in Charge of the Enforcement of Imperial Power” was clad in the red of the South direction and mounted on red sorrels. Following this pattern, North was the direction behind the throne, so the rear guard was dressed in black and had black horses. East, the direction where the sun rises, was at the throne’s left, therefore the left side was the side of honor in court ceremonial, and in military affairs the left wing took precedence.⁵ For this reason the left flank guard of the five generals was garbed in the blue of the East and mounted on grays, the closest approximation to blue in the natural color of horses. In the same way the white uniforms and horses of the right flank guard corresponded to the color of the West, and

the Maya assigned red to the East, black to the West, white to the North, yellow to the South, and green to the Center.

5. In contrast, the right side and the right wing took precedence in European usage, because of its “orientation” toward the sunrise; in facing the East the auspicious South would be at the viewer’s right.



FIGURE 3
 “Et ecce equus niger”; the Third Horseman on the black horse. *The Cloisters Apocalypse*, fol. 8v



FIGURE 4
 “Et ecce equus pallidus”; the Fourth Horseman on the pale horse. *The Cloisters Apocalypse*, fol. 9r

the yellow of the center cohort was that of the world center.

On an earlier occasion this traditional color scheme of Chinese cosmology had been adopted by one of the enemies of the Chinese empire, in order to secure military success by complying with the order of the universe.⁶ In 201 B.C. the Han emperor, Kao, personally led a great campaign against the Hung-no, steppe nomads who had become dangerous to the borderlands under their energetic chieftain, the *tan-hu* Mo-tun.⁷ The wily nomad succeeded in trapping the emperor with his entire army in their encampment at Pe'-teng. During the siege, which lasted for seven days, Mo-tun had his warriors distributed throughout the encircling ring

6. de Groot, p. 63.

7. *Mo-tun* (*Mao-dun*, *Maudun*) seems to be the Chinese transcription of the Turkic name *Bordur*: de Groot, p. 51; Franz Altheim, *Reich gegen Mitternacht* (Hamburg, 1955) pp. 20, 36; Hermann Schreiber, *Die Hunnen* (Vienna/Düsseldorf, 1976) p. 66. Most scholars consider the Hung-no to have been the ancestors of the Huns.

8. There is evidence that tribal groups of steppe nomads preferred horses of special coloring. In the frozen tombs of Pazyryk (6th–4th centuries B.C.) one kurgan contained a number of interred horses, all of them dark duns; another contained light sorrels. In 1971 a huge kurgan, dating to the 7th century B.C., was exca-

according to the colors of their horses: those on white horses at the West section, those on grays in the East, those on blacks in the North, and those on red or brown horses in the South.⁸ The finishing touch in this cosmological color scheme was that the center was occupied by the hapless Chinese army with their emperor, whose sacred color was yellow.

Interestingly enough, eight decades later, when the Han-emperors began another, this time successful, campaign⁹ against the Hung-no (121–117 B.C.), the victorious Chinese commander, Ho'-K'i-ping, bore the title P'iao-k'i-General. P'iao-k'i is the term for a yellow saddle horse with a white mane.¹⁰

It seems that the colors of the cardinal directions also

vated at the river Ujuk, in the Tuwa region; in three separate chambers it contained three groups of horses: 30 palominos, 30 bays, and 15 red sorrels: L. P. Potapov, “Über den Pferdekult bei den turksprachigen Völkern des Sajan-Altai-Gebirges,” *Abhandlungen und Berichte des Staatlichen Museums für Völkerkunde Dresden* 34 (1975) p. 486.

9. de Groot, pp. 120–144.

10. Horses of golden yellow hues are particularly frequent among the breeds of Central Asia: Sir Richard Glyn, *The World's Finest Horses and Ponies* (New York, 1971) pp. 107–109, 111, figs. 118, 120–123.

played a role in the names of nomad tribes and nations of Asia and eastern Europe, such as the White and Black Kumans, the White Huns, the Karakalpaks (*kara*=black), the Bjelo-Russians (*bjelo*=white)—the root of the word *rus* is probably “red”—and the various Sarmato-Alanic tribes, the Aorsi (*ors*=white) and the Roxolani (*rukhs*=light), famed for their “hoarfrost-colored” horses.

In the narrative scroll of the story of Lady Wen-chi, in the collections of the Museum’s Department of Far Eastern Art,¹¹ the Hung-no prince, one of the main characters of the story, is consistently represented as accompanied by five banners in the colors of the cardinal directions: white, black, blue, red, and yellow.¹² As the commander of the left (blue, or Eastern) wing of the Southern Hung-no, he rides a dappled gray (Figures 5, 6).

As might be expected, supernatural horses are subject to the same color scheme. In a study of the horse cult of the Turkic nomads of the Sajan-Altai region, the Leningrad anthropologist L. P. Potapov¹³ points out that the *bura*—ghost-horses¹⁴—painted on Siberian shamans’ drums and thought to carry the shamans on their spirit-travels through the heavens and the other-world, are regularly of the colors of four of the cardinal directions: “roe-deer-colored” (red), gray, white, and black (Figure 7). At the same time these *bura* of different colors are the distinctive mounts of individual tribal spirit-beings or demons, just like the distinctively colored horses of SS. George, Theodore, and Demetrius, or the gray horse Sleipnir of the Norse god Odin.¹⁵ It is

11. Published by the Metropolitan Museum, 1974: Robert A. Rorex and Wen Fong, *Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute: The Story of Lady Wen-chi*. The story is based upon an actual happening of about 195 A.D.

12. The banner of the Chinese envoy is shown as Imperial yellow.

13. Potapov, pp. 473–488, ill.

14. The *bura* are often represented as antlered, but are nevertheless called “horses.” Compare the antlered horse masks from the tombs of Pazyryk.

15. Odin has strong shamanistic features, and he is a god of the dead, leading the spirits of the warriors killed in battle riding through the sky as the Wild Hunt, very much like the fourth horseman on the pale horse, whose “name was Death, and hell followed with him.” The eight-legged gray horse Sleipnir may be a metaphor—*kenning*—for the dead man’s bier carried by four men, as suggested by H. R. Ellis Davidson, *Pagan Scandinavia* (New York, 1967) p. 125.



FIGURE 5
Lady Wen-chi’s abduction by Hung-no warriors, first picture of *Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute: The Story of Lady Wen-chi*, Chinese, 14th-century copy of an earlier scroll illustrating Liu Shang’s poems of about 773 A.D. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of the Dillon Fund, 1973.120.3

interesting that among the Siberian *bura* the fifth color, yellow, is not to be found. In cases where a shaman’s drum shows a fifth *bura*, it may be a spotted horse.¹⁶

Asiatic shamanism¹⁷ has as one of its essential features elaborate dream visions following a well-defined pattern of specific motifs, such as the swallowing of strange food (often of an intoxicating nature that may provoke the visions in the first place), views of the World Tree,

16. Potapov, pp. 475–476, 485

17. Andreas Lommel, *Shamanism: The Beginnings of Art* (New York, 1967).

and realistically experienced flight. The dreaming shaman would be aided in these events by helping spirits in the shape of fantastic animals, such as the eight-legged elk of the Tungus shamans or the spirit-horses in the four colors of the cardinal directions among the Turkic nomads of the Altai region. Similar helpers and elements appear in the visions of St. John, for instance, in the eating of the book (10:10–11), the tree of life (22:1–2), the transport through the air by the angel (17:3), the Lamb with seven horns and seven eyes (5:6), and the Four Horsemen¹⁸ on their white, red, black, and pale horses.¹⁹

If the rules of Far Eastern cosmology were applied to the order of appearance of the four apocalyptic horsemen, it would be quite different from the marching order of the military escort of the “Generals of the Five Directions of the World.” The direction West would then come first, as symbolized by the white horse, then South (red horse), North (black horse) and East (pale horse). This order goes against the course of the sun and puts the rider Death in the position of the East, in striking contrast to the Western principle, “ex oriente lux.” However, this reversal of the natural order of things would be only too appropriate for the beginning of the end of the world.

FIGURE 6
The nomads turn back. *The Story of Lady Wen-chi*;
fifteenth picture

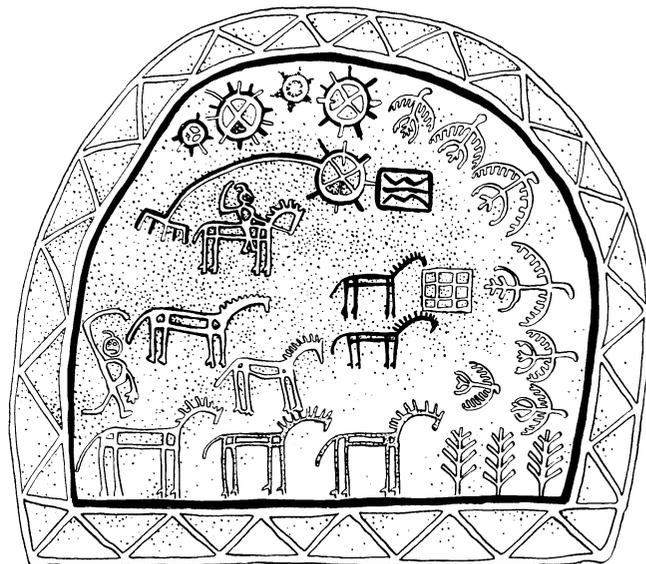
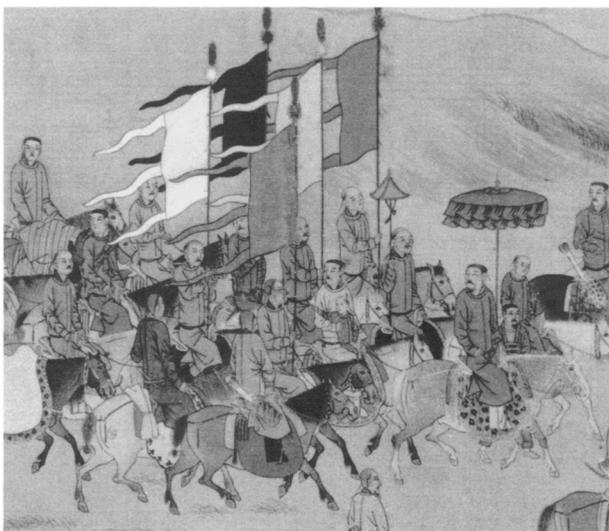


FIGURE 7
Design on a Teleut shaman's drum, representing
four pairs of horses colored white, black, red, and
gray. After Potapov

18. There is actually a fifth horse in Revelation (19:11–21), which is white, with his rider called Faithful and True, whose vesture was dipped in blood. This red-spotted rider offers a certain parallel to the fifth, spotted bura of the shamans' drums.

19. In Chinese cosmology, in addition to the five colors, there were tutelary spirits assigned to the cardinal directions: the Scarlet Bird or Phoenix to the South, the Green Dragon to the East (blue and green are interchangeable in most non-European color schemes), the White Tiger to the West, and the Dark Warrior (or Black Tortoise entwined with the Snake) to the North. These spirits correspond strangely with the four beasts of the Apocalypse (4:6–8) that call forth the Four Horsemen: the one that is like a lion calls forth the white horse, the one like a calf calls forth the red horse, the one with the face of a man calls forth the black horse and the fourth—like a flying eagle—the pale horse. Thus, the color white appears associated with tiger and lion—two aspects of the same feline creature—and the color black with man and warrior. The eagle and the phoenix are again both aspects of a bird creature, though the eagle is associated with the pale horse, and the phoenix with the color red. The calf, derived from Ezekiel's vision of the living creatures with the faces of an ox on the left side (Ezekiel 1:10), does not fit the pattern, but the green dragon of the East might be recognized in the yawning monster maw of Hell that followed the rider on the pale horse. Interestingly enough, the English text of the Confraternity-Douay Bible, used for the Museum's publication of *The Cloisters Apocalypse*, calls the equus pallidus a “pale-green horse.” For information about the spirits of the Chinese cardinal directions I would like to thank my colleagues Marilyn Fu and Suzanne G. Valenstein.