

BRINGING EUROPEAN TIGER CULTURE TO LIFE AGAIN, AND OCCIDENTAL EURASIAN TIGERS AS WELL

Dried bones... I will cause breath to enter in you...
I will lay sinews upon you, and will bring up flesh upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live ...
EZEKIEL, 37.

In summer 2007, wild asian tigers are much less than 2000, and they go quickly to complete extinction (1000 tigers have been lost in India between 2003 and 2006). The end of an aesthetic evolutive miracle occurs in a complete indifference of Europa and America. Thus, this animal had culturally nourished numerous civilizations during millenaries, Europa included..

During the twentieth century, the extirpation of occidental tigers (distributed from occidental China to Black sea) was an awful prelude to the present drama, thus it might have been a prevention to it.

It is now necessary to offer a second chance to european tiger culture and in a second time, to wild tigers in european areas.

Caspian tigers (*Panthera tigris virgata*), also named turan, persan or hyrcanian tigers officially disappear in the second half of twentieth century. As earlier as 1912, russians authorities had infact decided their extermination before transformation of central asiatic steppe into settlements.

They were the first sub – species to be integrally destroyed , as a dramatic prologue to the global one of present time.



They were curious animals, as big as bengal tigers, with a thick and dense fur, enormous paws with gigantic claws. During millenaries, they lived in harmony with eurasian villagers. There were no conflict between them, even if tigers were frequently inside villages. Their distribution after the post neolithic Arid period (4000 years ago) was very particular : it was a corridor from occidental China to Black sea, clearly disrupted from this of their congeners.

Preferential habitat was thick vegetation of willows and reed beds (sometimes of six meters

high) of eurasian rivers.

Probably in adaptation to those ecosystems, they were the only striped cats in the world : they had only stripes on their fur that were very numerous. Other tigers are rather lanceoled (mint leaf fur drawings), and only striped on the head, shoulders, legs and tails, as jaguars are ocelled and leopards are spotted.

They arrived in occidental Asia at the Holocene period.

They live near hippopotamuses on the Tiger banks more than 5000 years ago (Planhol 2004) and it was perhaps also the case up to Nil delta, in this predynastic egyptian period. In this period, Mongolia and central Asia are green and occidental tigers are geographically and so genetically connected to their oriental congeners. Their distribution is huge, from northern to southern eurasian regions. Hippos are dominant in a green Sahara with many lakes (with two of them are gigantic) and an immense swamp from Nil delta to Victoria Lake (some tigers have so perhaps been present in more southern regions of oriental Africa). After the hydric pejoration of the post neolithic arid period that dried mongolia and central Asia, this distribution is drastically reduced to a dendritic net in correspondance with hydrographic eurasian system. Separated from their oriental congeners, caspian tigers become a sub – species, consequently to their genetic isolation (after indonesian tigers during the wet holocene optimum).

At this historical step, the occidental tiger presence is rather elusive.

Thus, Gilgamesh (in the mesopotamian epic poem, 4700 BP) compares his fellow Enkidou to a desert tiger.

Then, massive hunting up to destruction of lions by Egyptians, Assyrians, persians, Greeks and Romans offer a second prosperity era to eurasian tigers*.

Circus tigers of Rome empire were in majority caspian tigers. They fight against aurochs and Atlas lions.

As Chinese tigers are often shown living with monks, caspian tigers are nourished by some holy men in Armenia, in legends of the 4th century.

Beginning of muslim period and political domination of nomadic populations induced retreat in human presence and prosperity for tigers.

In 1000 AD, these animals lived in central Asia with a few lions at the margin of extinction, descendants of prehistoric woolly rhinos with 100 years old ,10 meters long and 2 t sturgeons, in Baïkal Lake (Planhol 2004).

They were probably present in Ukraine at the same date, and perhaps up to more western danubian areas.

They were an important cultural and artistic symbol for european (scythians) and asiatic (mongols) nomadic civilizations, that they have spiritually structured (Lebedynsky I. 2001. Les Scythes. Errance eds.) as well as the bear in occidental Europa (Pastoureau 2007).

The word « tiger » comes from persian language. It is the same word as « arrow ».

Persians evoke the « Mazandaran tiger » overcome by the hero Rostam.

Moreover, a myth from iranian Kurdistan (gurani dialect) is the story of a white caspian tiger.

The mesopotamian river « Tiger » has been named according to an ancient legend where a princess could cross it helped by one of these animals (Galhano – Alves 2000).

« The horseman with tigerskin », georgian epic poem of 12th century, is considered as one of the masterpieces of world middle – age literature (see a french version, from Chota Roustavéli, translated by Sergueï Tsouladsé, Gallimard eds.).

Europeans in Middle – Age only knew tigers through this sub – species. They are depicted in the art as big blue leopards.

They are mentioned by Shakespeare in Macbeth (hyrcanian tiger), and much later, in detail,

by Alexandre dumas, who reports three stories of Caucasian regions that show the degree of intimacy these animals had with human communities (Sennepin 2006).

From the 1930 years, soviet authorities had tempted to save both siberian and caspian tigers. They succeed for the formers (thus they were less than 30) but failed for the seconds, more numerous ; they created the « Tigrovaya Balka » natural Park in Tadjikistan, amongst reeds, willows and poplars but this initiative was clearly insufficient, political will to make it efficient being absent.

After complete destruction on russian territory, caspian tigers survived in small numbers in Northern Iran, Eastern Turkey, and in some areas of central Asia like Turkmenistan forests or Afghanistan mountains (where they submitted a huge slaughter in 1939).

In the East of Turkey, 3 to 5 skins of these animals were still annually sold to irakian personalities of Saddam Hussein circle (to decorate their palaces) in 1980 years. They have probably survived in Anatoly since the beginning of 1990 years.

Azerbaïdjan Republic has produced a timber illustrating the animal in 1994.

Several reports indicate that a persian tiger has been killed in North Eastern Afghanistan in 1997 (Wikipedia).

On July 11th 2004, Turkish department of agriculture has retreated it from the pest list... Indications about present survival are weak thus some individuals could have taken ultimate refuges in some himalayan valleys (perhaps paws in Afghanistan) or particular forest areas of central Asia. Researches realized in 2006 have failed. Confusion with himalayan leopard could occur in some cases.

Occidental imagination is now haunted by the eurAsian tiger figure.

In a book upon Turkey published in 2002, Tim Cahill describes a journalist pursuing the fabulous beast in an initiatic journey, in a novel untitled : « Has somebody seen a tiger in the neighborhood ? » The author evokes the impressive size of the feline (« only the siberian tiger is larger ») and his « khaki fur ».

David Prynne, author of an article « caspian tiger, a lesson from history, 2003 » and of a book on siberian tiger in 2004, considers that russian efforts to preserve oriental giants probably show the will to avoid a remake of the sad story of its occidental congener.

French dramatist Laurent Gaudé has realized « Blue Euphrate tiger » (text published by ActesSud eds., 2002). The play has been recently presented in the theater « Les Ateliers » in Lyon (January 16th to february 4th).

Agonising Alexander the Great remembers his encounter with a fantastic blue tiger who shows him the way for his future conquests. The famous warrior promises he will follow his supernatural guide. As he fails, he falls in desperate agony.

This allegory shows the break down of european civilization consequently to the treason of original principles, and the absurd oblivion of their bear and tiger culture. They « let the tiger die » as siberian people say.

It's also the expression of a strong nostalgia, the sorrow and sadness of absence, and the hunger of resurrection**.

Orange on Azeri timber, White in iranian Kurdistan, Khaki for Cahill or Blue for Gaudé, the eurAsian tiger is clearly present in men souls.

A FUTURE FOR TIGERS IN EUROPA

Europeans have let die (in the best case) the strangest tiger of the world, who had structured their protohistoric representations as well as the bear did., with whom he constitutes an inseparable couple.

Moreover, they have completely compromised vital perspectives of the whole species during their political domination of Asia, where they destroyed almost all tigers and, even graver for the present and future, the tiger cultures in souls of asian people (a god that can be killed is no more a god).

Already, in the 9th century, Charlemagne has acted in the same way towards bears and bear cultures during his conquest of Europa (Pastoureau 2007).

Now, Europa must bring bear/tiger culture to life again, by all means (and they are both numerous and powerful, if political will is present).

In a second time, rewilded tigers nuclei may find places in prepared european areas (from this point of view, present climatic change would be of first importance for future distribution for this was and must become again a key axis of european civilization.

Europa has been built through common great projects.

Now, there is an opportunity of self reconciliation and revival to go further through an original and redemptorous action, towards the bear, unjustly fallen king, his *alter ego* the tiger, as well as ourselves, artificialy lost and in grief of somewhat we don't (up to now) understand.

Europa must now follow the Blue Tiger up to the end of the way.

* Tigers don't compete with lions. It's rather the contrary that is true, lions having social habits.

Prehistoric and historic ecology had evolved according to complex and evolutive relational dialectic between men, lions, bears and tigers, in the holarctic region as a whole.

**A european text of law puts obligation for countries belonging to this political structure to restore their original fauna. *Panthera tigris virgata* belongs to it. He was still present in eastern Turkey up to recent years. He was retreated of pests list in 2004. Three years after this decision, Europa must initiate a strong policy of come back of tigers in his historical areas.