

de Blocqueville. Quatorze mois de captivité. 1861.

Gallica: «Le tour du monde 1860. Paris ».

A French officer and Shah's portraitist, serving in the Persian army which confidently attacked the Merv Tekes in 1860, only to be routed. Taken prisoner, the author waits 14 months his ransom and liberation at Merv. He is well treated and wanders freely through the encampment, making friends. His description of the Teke way of life is very similar to O'Donovan's, sometimes even more precise.

De Blocqueville describes his captors with ironical fondness.

A very valid booklet from an ethnological point of view. There is quite some mention of rugs, but again the ruggie gets a bit frustrated.

Page 238-239: Ramshackle Persian army made-up mostly of non professional soldiers, too poor to bribe anybody and to avoid draft. There is corruption at all levels. Instead of the 30 000 soldiers paid for by the Shah, only 12000-15000 are really under arms.

Page 240-241: **May 1860**, the Persian army reaches Sarakhs on the left bank of the Tejen, where the Persians had rebuilt, around 1853-1855, a small fortified town with walls, towers and 10 canons,.

Two Salor Turkmen auxiliaries are sent for a reconnoitering mission along the lower Tejen River, only one returns, but wounded.

(Note: This confirms that at least some of the Salor tribesmen expelled from Sarackhs by the Persians in 1832 were back, with Persian authorization.)

About 1000 Teke cavalry start harassing the slow Persian army immediately after it has left Sarakhs to move toward Merv.

Page 242-243: The Persians reach the Merv oasis July 6, 1860 together with 200-300 allied Saryk cavalry, but the army has no equipment to build bridges and finds it very difficult to cross the myriad of irrigation channels.

They manage to occupy without any resistance the empty, former Saryk, fortress Porsa kala, overlooking the main Merv dam. The mud walls of Porsa kala enclose a space large enough for 30 000 yurts.

The Persian's passive and incompetent behavior, the highly unfavorable terrain and the Tekes' guerrilla tactics lead to heavy casualties.

Unwittingly, desperate for food, the Persians attack a nearby settlement of Merv Salors, who had remained neutral so far. As a consequence the Salors join the fight against the Persians.

(Note: from this information we can infer that a Salor clan is still living, peacefully, free and weaponed, in the Merv oasis. This is coherent with a note of O'Donovan who signals, 20 years later, 170 Salor yurts in the oasis in a fertile and irrigated area.)

After two months of idleness, the Persians finally march on the Teke camp, but the Turkmen fight bravely and intelligently, using the channels and marshes of the oasis to their advantage. The battle turns to a complete disaster after the Persian commanders are seen fleeing the battleground. Nearly all the Persian soldiers are either killed or captured. De Blocqueville, trapped in an irrigation channel, surrenders.

Most of the prisoners are promptly sold on the Khivan or Bokharan slave markets. Some captive officers, including de Blocqueville, are kept for ransom by the Tekes.

During the following 14 months, the author lives relatively free, well treated, in Merv. An opportunity he uses for talking with the Turkmen and for observing their way of life.

Page 247-248: Interesting description of Tekes' clothes and silver jewels (with good illustrations page 249).

The author notes that «...the race is very much mixed...» due to many « naturalized » former slaves from Persia, Bokhara and Afghanistan, mostly in-married women.

There are about 20 000 yurts in Merv.

Akhal Tekes, Merv Tekes and Tejen Tekes share the same tribal origin.

Page 250: Due to his own personal prestige, Kouchid Kuli Khan enjoys some preeminence over the other Khans of the main Teke clans (Otamish and Tokamish) and over the elders of the sub-clans.

(Note: During these years, the victor of the Saryk- and Salor Turkmen, now also the victor of the hated Persians, Buonaparte-Kuchid, became a dictator. A case more unique than rare in Turkmen history).

De Tocqueville's description of the Teke political system is identical to O'Donovan's 20 years later, except for the exceptional position taken by Kouchid Khan.

The author is highly surprised by the little difference in behavior and in speech rights between any hereditary Khan and the poorest Turkmen shepherd.

Inauguration of a new yurt: The master of the yurt sits opposite to the entrance in the center, with the women on his left and the men, including the visitors on his right hand side.

Page 251-252: Turkmen food and diner etiquette: Conform to O'Donovan's description and even more detailed, although O'Donovan gives also the Turkmen name for most items.

Around 1860, the Merv Teke upper-class does not yet use arak or wine, contrary to O'Donovan's hosts, 20 years later. The only slightly intoxicating liquor which they drink in large quantities, is fermented camel milk.

Description of a Teke woman' multiple jobs. Spinning and dyeing wool, weaving carpets are mentioned. Wool washing is a man's work (or rather whole-sheep-washing, since the wool is usually washed together with its legitimate owner). The work can be shared with women with the sheep consent.

Page 252-254: Description of carpet weaving: Performed during the dry season only. Description of the horizontal loom and the known tools.

(Note: Needless to say, there is no mention of men ever weaving, not even an old Khan, contrary to a creative blogger's fantasy.)

Main sizes produced are 300X150 (Khali). Each tribe or family has some specific motifs which are passed from mother to daughter.

The Turkmen woman has a whole lot of work to do and in her very rare spare time she keeps busy with spinning, dyeing and weaving.

Men work much less and enjoy idling, smoking a water pipe, playing music or chess, drinking tea, eating, visiting neighbors and chatting with each others on market days. Their main and most appreciated hobby is participating to alamans (slave-hunting raids) and bartering their booty at the Khivan- or Bokharan slave markets. They also cut covers and cloth for their loved horses or camels, and make ropes, shoes or riding boots.

(Note ; According to O'Donovan some rare birds even produce boots for sale).

They also perform (rather limited-) agricultural work and take good care of their herds.

(Note: Mostly the job of the younger or poorer Turkmen).

Page 254: The Turkmen are Sunni, but are quite relaxed on religious matters, except for the blind hatred they feel (or simulate) for the Shia. Malicious tongues, even among Turkmen, suggest that they must hate the Shias, picturing them as Allah's enemies, purely for marketing reasons, since enslaving genuine Moslems would not be acceptable, according to the Koran.

Description of an annual religious festival *(not mentioned by O'Donovan).*

Page 257: The wedding:

«... They load 3 or 4 camels with rugs and small garlands of very colorful silk...». After the ceremony and a mock bride abduction, a procession brought the bride to her new oy (white oy if the family is wealthy), where she stayed about 2 weeks. She then returned to her parent's ev for 12-18 months, during which she weaved carpets and bags, made felt mats for her new home, being visited from time to time by her new husband. At the end of this period she moved to her new home on a highly decorated camel... »

The author states that sons of a former slave wife do not enjoy quite the same rights than sons of a Turkmen woman. Such cases of misalliances are quite frequent among the Tekes.

Page 262: The «barchi», a singer and musician playing the 2-cords Turkoman «doutar», has the best payed job in the oasis. Poets and story tellers are also popular. Chess is a passion for Tekes, who even play while on their way to alamans.

The author notes that rheumatisms are extremely frequent since soil, felts and rugs on which people sleep is quite frequently wet.

(Note: This makes the poetic image (suggested by the above mentioned blogger of an elderly Khan weaving a torba, even a bit less likely)

(Note: Frequently wet rugs and frequently high temperatures: what a good explanation for running colors!)

Page 263: Horses: The true Turkmen horse is found less frequently in Merv than in other Turkmen tribes, perhaps as a consequence of the too many wars this tribe has fought in recent years. Akhals Teke, Salors and Saryks are said to own a higher proportion of the famed genuine Turkmen horses.

The Tekes instead have a higher proportion of (probably stolen) Khorassan horses, (much inferior to the Turkmen ones) and also of small, hairy Khivan- and Khazack horses.

(Note: Not a convincing theory IMHO since the other Turkmen tribes mentioned had more than their share of battles too and were more often on the losing side).

(Note: According to other visitors the Yomud- and Göklan Turkmen raised the best horses)

The author describes the horse «clothes»: a large felt cover carried in summer and winter and an additional, still larger felt cover in winter.

Page 266: Every week, on average, at least one alaman is organized, the number of participants varies from a dozen to several hundreds. The alaman is mostly organized by citizens enjoying a strong reputation for their talent as raiders and leaders, they usually are addressed as «serdars».

(Note: O' Donovan mentions that the raiders are mostly younger and middle class Turkmen (at least they must be able to own a horse), since the alaman is the best way to escalate the social ladder.

After age 40 the reasonably wealthy Turkmen prefers idling in Merv. However, he is often the investor/sponsor of the raid, sharing in the booty).

The fertile and mostly light soil does not require much work.

Keeping the dams and irrigation channels in good shape is by far the most demanding job.

Cultivation is limited to the needs of the family and to provide items for barter.

(Note: The Turkmen despise the farmer's work and are not even interested in a gentleman farmer's life, unlike the Uzbeks from Khiva and Bokhara.)

Horses, camels and sheep are kept in limited numbers near the yurt, the large herds are kept at the periphery of the oasis, especially near marshes, under the responsibility of junior or hired poorer tribesmen.

Wool is spun and woven or used to make felt and cords.

The dyes, like madder are mostly imported from Bokhara.

(Note1: If true this would mean that the normal Teke family, short of cash, would find it quite difficult to procure the dyes necessary for weaving rugs or textiles! They would have to buy not only the indigo-dyed wool, but even the madder roots for the red shades, the zalil for the yellow shades etc... In a society where many people do not even have the means to buy tea (their main luxury) one could suppose that only an elite would weave carpets on a regular basis.)

(Note 2: O'Donovan indicates that an (upper class-?)Turkmen always carries some tea, and when visiting a poorer friend he would offer him some of it to avoid embarrassing him by not being able to make the mandatory tea offered to visitors.

The same author describes the ev in which he lived 4 months with a Yomud family: The owner was «the Khan's first henchman», thus probably middle class, but there was no woven rug on the soil, only cheaper felt mats.)

Main exports are prisoners, sold on the Khivan and Bokhara markets.

The Tekes import tea, tanned-and dyed leather, Russian cast iron pots, sugar, tea pots, china bowls, silk, cotton and dyes.

Page 267: Rain & thunderstorms in spring, scorching heat in summer, some rain in fall, less than one month of snow in winter. Northwestern winds, sometimes very strong, are frequent except in summer when they are replaced with hot, very dry eastern winds.

H. de Blocqueville

Notice sur les nomades du Turkestan.

Gallica: <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5788942t/f11.image.r=turkestan%20.langFR>

Page 8.

About the clothes of Teke ladies: «... *In all their clothes the (rubbia-) red) is dominant...*»

Page 12-13

De Blocqueville mentions that the Khans of the Teke, scions of old and prestigious families, are not necessarily chosen as members of the council which rules the tribe. The Teke elect people with proven talent and as honest as possible.

He mentions then the future Teke dictator, Khouchi Khan, who, at the time of de Blocqueville captivity already is a highly influential member of the upper council, but is not able yet to decide alone:

«...From the «Kedkouda» (also called akh sakhal», the «white beard») members of the leading body to the most insignificant member of the community,, everybody can give his opinion.... »

The calm, cordial and matter-of-fact discussions between men as well as the liberty of speech and of behavior of the women amaze de Blocqueville. The women do not veil their face, even when a host stays in the yurt, they only make the simulacra of hiding the lower part of their face.