



# The Royal Hunt in Eurasian History

Thomas T. Allsen

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Thomas T. Allsen

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*For  
Opal and Kitkat  
the  
Black Ears in our Household*



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## *Hunting Histories*

### World Histories and the World of Animals

Almost all peoples have explanations, usually articulated in mythology, for the creation of the world, of life and human culture. In these first grand narratives, beginnings or new departures in the cultural sphere are typically attributed to the intervention of the gods or to the inventions of cultural heroes. As wisdom inherited from founders, these narratives, rarely challenged from within, commonly retained their relevancy and currency for long periods of time.

There were, however, “evolutionary” alternatives to these mythologies of bestowal, particularly in the Western intellectual tradition, which has produced a long series of theories that divide human historical development into three successive stages.<sup>1</sup> The most familiar of these, and the first to be based on systematic examination of physical remains, is the “three-age system,” which posited sequential stone, bronze, and iron ages. This model, first outlined by Scandinavian naturalists in the late eighteenth century, gave rise to a new kind of grand narrative, one that linked cultural evolution to the human ability to manipulate inanimate materials.<sup>2</sup> But this was not the only three-age system then circulating in Europe; another, far older notion going back at least to Varro in the first century B.C.E., maintained that humans passed through three distinct stages in their history: hunting, herding, and agriculture. These stages, what we would now term subsistence systems, were held to be universal and sequential. Long assumed to be self-evident, this theory survived until the end of the nineteenth century, when the German geographer Eduard Hahn convincingly demonstrated that animals were first domesticated by settled farmers, so that the “herding stage,” that is, pastoralism in its varied forms, arose from and followed agriculture.<sup>3</sup>

What is striking about this particular conceptualization of cultural development, whatever its chronological failings, is that in an earlier agrarian age history was seen to turn on the relationship of humans to other animate objects; this, of course, in sharp contrast to the three-age system of the early industrial era, which, true to its own terms of reference, tied historical change to inanimate objects, tools, and materials.

While this oldest of the three-age systems has lost its standing as a viable narrative of culture history, it is nonetheless true that the relationship between humans and animals, so integral to this theory, retains its importance even though the development of this relationship through time cannot be accommodated by simplistic unilineal evolutionary formulas.

For our specific purposes, that of writing a hunting history, one helpful way of conceptualizing this intricate web of human-animal interaction is through David Harris's perceptive typology of animal exploitation. In this schema there are three categories of human-animal ecological relationship: predation, protection, and domestication. Predation, obviously, involves scavenging, fishing, and hunting. Protection entails manipulation of the environment to attract or benefit favored prey, or free-range "herding" of wild species, and limited taming of individual young animals as pets or helpmates. Domestication, on the other hand, involves the creation of breeding populations that are maintained over long periods in genetic isolation from their wild progenitors. What is key here is that as human communities move from predation to protection to domestication, there is a decreasing dependence on wild animals for protein and products, and an increasing dependence on domesticated species.<sup>4</sup>

To Harris's admirable exposition of these transitions, I would only add the following as a corollary: with successful domestication of plants and animals, the economic importance of hunting steadily decreases while its political significance steadily increases. And it is the politics of the hunt that forms one of the central themes of this work. But to properly develop this theme, I must first situate this study in the broader context of the various possible types of hunting histories, some of which have been realized and some of which have not.

### Pursuing Protein

Because the hunting-gathering method of resource extraction prevailed throughout most of the history of our species, it has been intensely studied by archeologists and ethnographers in a quest to understand the long-term biological and cultural evolution of hominids.<sup>5</sup> Hunting-gathering societies have also been at the center of many prolonged debates in the social sciences concerning the ecological bases of culture and behavior and the methodological controversies over the use of analogy in historical reconstructions. And most recently, hunter-gatherers have been invoked in weighty theoretical disputes over group versus individual selection.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, much of the extended history of hunter-gatherers has been hotly contested. This is well exemplified in the changing image of such societies over

the past one hundred years. From primitive savages, at the mercy of cruel nature, they were recast as the original “affluent society,” enjoying a surprising amount of leisure time as well as a good diet, good health, and a large measure of social equality. Much of this, so the argument runs, was lost with the rise of civilization. In such a perspective agriculture is no longer viewed as progress, an improvement in the human condition.<sup>7</sup>

Interpretations of this earliest stage of our hunting history are so varied because the evidence is scarce and difficult to read. Even such a basic question as the relative role and weight of meat and vegetal matter in the diet of early hominids remains a point of dispute. This is so because the acquisition of meat, whatever its nutritional importance, is a complicated question since this source of energy might be “captured” by active hunting or opportunistic scavenging, or by some combination of the two. While more complex societies tend to view scavenging meat from recent kills as inappropriate, this was hardly the case in foraging societies.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, some specialists now argue that population growth in the Later Paleolithic should be associated with “dietary breadth.” This expansion and diversification of the human diet, called the “broad spectrum revolution hypothesis,” involved increasing utilization of small animals and scavenging in consequence of growing pressure on available resources.<sup>9</sup>

Although disagreement abounds, there is a strong consensus on at least one crucial point: all agree that there were great variations in the hunting-gathering mode. For some societies predation may be generalized, particularly in temperate climes where gathering is important, or highly specialized, particularly in northern latitudes where people live off species such as reindeer or sea mammals. In the view of many scholars it is the extreme plasticity of this method of resource extraction that explains why humans have been able to occupy and successfully exploit a great variety of ecosystems from the high arctic to tropical rain forests.<sup>10</sup>

But hunting was plastic in yet another important way. The advent of domesticated plants and animals, the so-called Neolithic revolution, did not replace or even displace hunting, as is sometimes implied or imagined by evolutionary models in which new modes of production triumph over and destroy the old. In many places hunting as an economic activity “runs parallel” for millennia with new methods of resource extraction, thus greatly complicating hunting, herding, and agricultural histories.<sup>11</sup> This adaptability is reflected in the striking variations in the hunt found among peoples of very similar ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Among the Tungusic speakers of eastern Siberia and northern Manchuria, for example, some groups followed and hunted wild reindeer as their primary occupation, some combined true pastoral nomadism and hunting, some agriculture and hunting, while still others fished in the summer

and trapped fur-bearing animals in the winter; moreover, some Tungus hunted only from horseback and some only on foot.<sup>12</sup>

Such variation, fashioned by environmental conditions, historical contingency, and cultural choice, demonstrates the great flexibility built into human hunting: it mutates, combines comfortably with other means of subsistence, and becomes an auxiliary occupation, supplementing the “new” economy in important ways.

The latter adaptation is particularly evident among the pastoral nomads of the Eurasian steppe who seem to have developed a special “herder-hunter mode of production.”<sup>13</sup> Nomads hunted for a number of reasons, including the protection of their herds from predators, but food acquisition was always a powerful motive. The importance of game in their diet is widely reported in ancient and medieval literary sources.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the accumulating archeological evidence points to the same conclusion. For example, during the Khazar era, from the seventh to the tenth century C.E., wild animal bones account for 20–25 percent of the total recovered from many sites along the Don River. The presence of weapons specialized for the chase further underscores the relevance of the hunt for that economy.<sup>15</sup>

In light of these data it would be mistaken to understand the hunt in nomadic societies as simply a means of procuring “survival food” in times of shortage. Game was in fact part of their normal fare and, moreover, part of the haute cuisine regularly served at the courts of nomadic empires. In the eleventh century, envoys from the Chinese Song dynasty (960–1279) to the Liao (907–1125), founded by the Qitan, were repeatedly treated to such delicacies as marinated pheasant and choice cuts of musk deer meat.<sup>16</sup>

In the era of the Mongolian empire, the thirteenth to the fourteenth century, the same culinary patterns and preferences are noted. Marco Polo relates the prevalence of game birds in the imperial cuisine, which we know from Chinese sources were procured by special hunting households (*liehu*) subordinate to the Bureau of Household Provisions (*Xuanhui yuan*).<sup>17</sup> But commoners, too, were dependent on the hunt. Carpini, in Mongolia in the 1240s, was well aware of the dietary importance of the chase, and Rubruck, a decade later, states unequivocally that the Mongols “obtain a large portion of their food by the chase.”<sup>18</sup> The reason for this reliance on game is made abundantly clear by Xu Ting, a Song envoy in Mongolia in the 1230s. He reports that “throughout the entire hunting season [of winter] they constantly eat that which they have taken in the chase and so kill fewer sheep.”<sup>19</sup> Hunting, therefore, contributed additional calories and, at the same time, spared herd animals which provide the milk products so central to the nomadic diet.<sup>20</sup> In the Eurasian steppe, herders, for very sound economic reasons, were always skilled and active hunters.

It is perhaps more surprising that throughout premodern times sedentary agriculturalists also relied on the hunt to augment their food supply. Writing in sixth-century northern Europe, Gregory of Tours revealingly remarks that droughts and epidemics not only decimated domestic herds but game animals as well.<sup>21</sup> Such losses are coupled in medieval sources because both categories of animals had economic value to the populace, which ate much game. Thus, land in northern and eastern Europe was routinely evaluated not only in terms of its potential productivity for crops and livestock, but also for its potential harvest of fish and game.<sup>22</sup> This was the case, George Duby argues, because in many parts of early medieval Europe agricultural production was insufficient to feed the population, and consequently hunting and gathering still held a prominent place in the domestic economy of noble and peasant.<sup>23</sup> This means, of course, that knowledge of hunting-gathering techniques never died out in these societies, and that while nominally in an “agricultural mode” they continued to draw upon the time-tested practices of a much earlier mode of production for enrichment and, at times, for survival.

Since early medieval Europe was, arguably, one of the less developed agricultural societies in Eurasia, this continued commitment to hunting may be ascribed to special circumstances and therefore deemed exceptional. What then, of the ancient cradles of agriculture? Had they freed themselves from, progressed beyond, these older methods of resource extraction? The answer is no, hunting still had its place in the nutritional life of the early centers of settled life. To begin in the ancient Near East, stag and gazelle were served at the great banquets of the Assyrian king Ashurnasirpal II (r. 884–860 B.C.E.) and there are biblical references to the consumption of venison in the heyday of King Solomon (1 Kings 4.23–24).<sup>24</sup> In the pre-Islamic empires of Iran, those of the Achaemenids (534–330 B.C.E.), Parthians (247 B.C.E.–227 C.E.), and Sasanids (226–651), court and commoners regularly ate the proceeds of the chase.<sup>25</sup> The same pattern of consumption can be documented in the neighboring region of Transcaucasia in late antiquity and the Middle Ages.<sup>26</sup> In more recent times, according to European travelers, the Mughal court also ate much game, while antelope, hare, peacock, and deer, all killed by local hunters, were readily available “at easie Rates” in the coastal cities of India.<sup>27</sup>

More unexpectedly, this pattern prevailed in China, which by many historians’ reckoning had the most sophisticated and productive agrarian economy in the world until the rise of modern scientific farming. During the whole of the imperial era, 221 B.C.E. to 1911, wild rabbit and deer supplemented the rural population’s diet, and much game was sold in urban centers such as Hangzhou, one of the major cities of the Song era.<sup>28</sup> In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this was still the case in Beijing and other cities of the north, which received



from Manchuria, particularly in wintertime when meat was easier to transport, substantial quantities of deer, boar, and game birds.<sup>29</sup>

Beyond the obvious conclusion that the nutritional contribution of hunting to the human diet did not end with the advent of agriculture, even of the most intensive kind, this brief survey reveals another consequential fact: down to very recent times, there was still much wilderness intact, some of it close to major urban centers and to areas of agriculture. This meant that human encounters with wild animals were commonplace, and these often traumatic confrontations had, as we shall see, serious political ramifications.

### Pursuing Profit

Not only did hunting for food continue long after domestication, but the very existence of agricultural societies provided the impetus for the emergence of new types of hunting, one form of which was highly commercialized. This was the specialized hunting for various animal products which were then traded over long distances. In some instances these hunters came from societies, such as ancient Egypt, with a strong economic and ideological commitment to agriculture.<sup>30</sup> Their presence in such environments is evident, too, in the laws of imperial China, which made provision for the regulation and taxation of the professional hunters in their midst.<sup>31</sup>

But what is more intriguing is that even true hunter-gatherers became enmeshed in long-distance commercial networks. One little appreciated example of this phenomenon is the trade in bird-of-paradise plumes; procured in New Guinea, these colorful objects were sent to China, India, West Asia, and into the Pacific for around 2000 years.<sup>32</sup> More familiar is the northern fur trade, in which hunter-gatherers became linked with large-scale, international trading systems through barter arrangements and tributary relationships. Between the ninth and twelfth centuries, for instance, the indigenous peoples of the Volga-Ural region and Western Siberia supplied high-quality furs—sable, ermine, and black fox—to the Bulgars on the middle Volga, who traded them to merchants who then carried the furs to Middle Eastern markets where they commanded high prices.<sup>33</sup>

It is evident from even these few examples that many of the animal products that traveled well were prestige goods from remote and storied lands. In terms of volume and value, fur was probably the most important but tusks and horns also moved great distances. From prehistoric times ivory was in great demand because of its intrinsic qualities, its color, coolness, texture, and durability, as well as its symbolic power.<sup>34</sup> More surprising, perhaps, was the extensive

traffic in walrus tusk and narwhal horn, products harvested in the Arctic Ocean and the North Pacific, that in the Middle Ages reached markets from China to the Islamic world.<sup>35</sup>

We need to consider as well the traffic in live animals, a topic to which we will return later. For the moment, a single illustration will suffice to bring home its commercial potential. In the 1680s, according to eyewitness testimony, the king of Siam was continuously engaged in the trapping of wild elephants for the export trade to India. The three to four hundred animals exported annually were, we are told, an important source of income for the royal treasury.<sup>36</sup>

While rarities and exotica dominated this long-distance traffic in animals and animal products, and therefore supplied the incentive for much of the commercial hunting, more mundane commodities are also on record. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Siam also exported large quantities of deer hides to Japan.<sup>37</sup> There were, then, niches for commercial hunters in most pre-modern societies; the persistent royal interest in their activities shows it to have been a profitable business, one that is still actively pursued today, and one deserving of more scholarly attention than it has received to date.<sup>38</sup>

### Pursuing Power

Since, as previously discussed, most of our history unfolds during the hunting-gathering stage, this method of resource extraction has been subject to intense scrutiny. But once plants and animals are domesticated, hunting loses its privileged status as a key element in a universally recognized mode of production. Scholarly interest in its post-Neolithic history, therefore, drops off precipitously, with the notable exception of the northern fur trade in medieval and early modern times.<sup>39</sup> This relative lack of interest is mistaken on several counts: first, as just argued, hunting continued to have an important economic function, as a source of nutriment and trade goods, and second, hunting, particularly on the elite level, performed in most agrarian and pastoral societies an array of important political functions.

Much of this has been missed, or at least undervalued. Part of the problem is that hunting was so common that it tends to be acknowledged and then ignored. Further, when discussed at all, the history of hunting has been construed too narrowly; for many, the chase is simply an aspect of elite behavior to be included in discussions of everyday life in medieval Europe.<sup>40</sup>

Scholarly writing on the most recent history of hunting continues this approach, concentrating on its recreational aspects in the West and its one-time colonies, and has become enmeshed in contemporary environmental debates.

The hunter's controversial role as conservationist, naturalist, and game manager is, of course, a legitimate and vital part of modern environmental history.<sup>41</sup> But it should also be recognized that these same issues have a much longer history, one closely tied to the royal hunt. To fully uncover these connections, it is necessary to cast a wider thematic, geographical, and chronological net. A start in this direction has been made by students of the medieval Mongols who have recognized that their hunts served a number of purposes in common with other steppe peoples.<sup>42</sup> Still, it seems to me that an even larger context is called for, one that compares political hunting in different cultural and ecological zones of Eurasia over the long term. Only in this way can the multiple functions of the royal hunt be identified and clarified.

This study concentrates on elites and royal persons, and thus on hunting as a predominantly political activity. And while avowedly writing a history from the top down, the general populace and, of equal importance, the animals, will receive their share of attention. So, too, will the environmental and cultural dimensions of the royal hunt; to my mind, the exercise of political authority, the appropriation of nature, and the diffusion of culture are closely entwined in the history of Eurasia.

As my focus is on political hunting, I must distinguish it from the economic variety. First and most important, there is the matter of numbers—as Fernand Braudel has reminded us, numbers do matter. Subsistence hunting can be conducted individually or by collectives of variable but limited size. In agricultural and pastoral societies, however, hunts, or drives, routinely involve far larger numbers, sometimes entire kin groups or settlements and, when conducted on this basis, there is a noticeable increase in ceremonial and political activity. Elaborate feasts are prepared and the organizers of the hunt are recognized and honored, thus according them increased prestige and influence.<sup>43</sup> Large-scale royal hunts involving thousands or tens of thousands of participants were the rule, not the exception, and their magnitude invested this form of hunting with political meaning. Indeed, this is true of any large-scale organizational effort, whether building projects or the production of ceremonies, celebrations, and entertainments. In such cases, the means of production is as important as the product itself. In our case, the royal hunt displays a ruler's ability to marshal and order labor, military manpower, and individuals (both humans and animals) with very special skills. Moreover, by the very nature of the hunt, these abilities were dramatically demonstrated throughout the countryside for the edification of subjects. And a forceful demonstration in one sphere, such as the hunt, strongly implies an equivalent competency in others, such as tax collection or bandit suppression. The royal hunt thus served as an effective reaffirmation of a ruler's capacity to manage large-scale enterprises, that is, to govern.<sup>44</sup>

A second difference between political and economic hunting is also susceptible to quantification, at least in principle. Subsistence hunting was primarily a means of capturing energy and had therefore to be efficient; that is, the energy returns over the long term had to exceed the energy investments. In this sense one can speak of subsistence or commercial hunting as a predominantly economic activity. In contrast, a royal hunt hardly ever returned energy. With their many participants and spectators, their impedimenta, and bag of inedible game—jackals, tigers, and so on—royal hunts typically resulted in a net energy loss. Indeed, such hunts, it is fair to say, were all about the lavish expenditure of energy, and such expenditures are preeminently political acts.<sup>45</sup>

Before proceeding further, I should stress that I do not mean to imply that there were two “pure” types of hunting, the one exclusively for economic ends, the other for political. On the contrary, the motives and objectives for human hunting fall within a continuum, along which there are many fine gradations and unexpected admixtures.

We start at the economic end, where the pursuit of protein is paramount, crucial for survival. But even at the extremes there are no pure types. It is true that in hunting and gathering bands, politics, whether external or internal, is kept at a minimum; indeed, avoidance, departure, and self-segregation are major mechanisms of the political process. Still, it would be mistaken to think of subsistence hunters as completely apolitical. Band societies do have politics, but of a special kind. There is maneuvering over a number of issues, both vital and trivial, that require a collective response: the resolution of social conflict among individual members, questions of relationships with outsiders, and decisions concerning movements to new camping/hunting grounds. The political processes in band societies are therefore informal, typically involving discussions that lead to consensus, and it is in the context of private discussion and public debate that leadership is exercised. Personal power is based, not on coercion, but on individual knowledge, experience, persuasiveness, and force of personality. To use George Silverbauer’s apt phrase, in such societies “leadership is authoritative, rather than authoritarian.”<sup>46</sup>

In the middle range of the continuum there are those admixtures in which economic and political motivations are more or less evenly balanced. Manchuria can serve as an illustration. Here the subsistence pattern from the Neolithic down to the nineteenth century was a combination of small-scale agriculture, sedentary animal husbandry, craft production, fishing, and hunting—hunting for protein, for profit, and in the quest for political power. Such a combination is particularly well documented in the case of the Jürchen, founders of the Jin dynasty that ruled over North China 1115–1234.<sup>47</sup>

At the opposite end of the continuum, where hunting was pursued primarily

for political-ideological ends, its other functions were never entirely submerged. The Qitan, most certainly political hunters, could engage in the chase for quite mundane reasons—for pleasure or for protein—that bore no political significance.<sup>48</sup> Even more revealing, in the Mughal empire (1526–1858), where the royal hunt was a key element in the governance of the realm, a ruler such as Humāyūn (r. 1526–30 and 1555–56), when his political fortunes fell, readily converted his royal hunt into a search for food that was desperately needed for physical survival.<sup>49</sup> Thus, while there are no pure types of hunting, there are nonetheless meaningful distinctions to be made, a point that will be documented and elaborated in succeeding chapters.

### This Hunting History

In the course of conducting the research for this work, I slowly came to the realization that the history of hunting cannot be isolated from the study of a much wider range of human-animal interactions that now engage the attention of diverse disciplines, from biology to archaeology and philosophy. Such inquiries can extend from tightly focused investigations of human impact on particular animal populations to fundamental questions about the concept of humanity and animality, that is, about sensitive definitions concerning nature and culture, and the borders that may, or may not, separate these realms.<sup>50</sup>

To understand the royal hunt, we must take into account the myriad ways in which animals, wild and domesticated, are entwined in human cultural history: animals, after all, are foes and friends, symbols and signs; they serve as talismans, as *objets d'art*, as markers of status, as commodities and presentations, as sources of entertainment, clothing, food, and medicine, and even as sources of wisdom and models of human behavior. The full significance and meaning of human hunting, particularly in its political form, only becomes intelligible when properly situated in this larger tapestry of human-animal interactions. To cite but one obvious example, the special powers attributed to successful hunters derive, in no small measure, from the special powers and properties attributed to the animals they vanquish. Fabulous beasts can only be slain by fabulous humans. This means that we will need to take an interest in the attitudes toward animals and nature held by elites and by the populace at large.

Having delineated my subject thematically, I must now do the same for its temporal and geographical boundaries, at least in a preliminary fashion. Initially, I thought I could “start” with the Achaemenids, the first universal empire, and then work forward in time. I soon discovered, however, that long before the Persians, the royal hunt was a well-established institution in early Egypt,

Mesopotamia, India, and China. I therefore ventured, with considerable trepidation, into these specialized fields of study, in which I have no previous experience or training, in search of antecedents and analogues.

At the other end, one might extend the life of the royal hunt to the mid-twentieth century. In 1940, *Time* featured Hermann Göring on its cover and in the accompanying story noted that the “No. 2 Nazi was Reich Master of Hunt,” lived in a 100,000-acre game preserve, imported falcons from Iceland, and expected his guests to play with his pet lion cub, Caesar.<sup>51</sup> In every particular, including the dramatic destruction of his own hunting park at war’s end, the Reichsmarshal and Reichsjagdmeister was following age-old practices widely shared by the political elites of Eurasia.<sup>52</sup> More realistically, perhaps, the termination date of the royal hunt should be set in the first half of the nineteenth century, when, under the impact of firearms and new international styles, traditional modes of elite hunting fell into “comparative disuse” in its last bastions, the Middle East and India, although the royal hunt survived in Qājār Iran (1779–1924) almost to the end of the dynasty.<sup>53</sup>

Geographically, there is, I believe, an identifiable core area in which many of the common and distinguishing features of the royal hunting complex were developed. The notion of the core will be elaborated in greater detail in the next chapter, but for now this territory can be defined briefly as Iran, North India, and Turkestan, though, as we shall see, many aspects of this complex show up much farther afield, some reaching the extremities of the Eurasian landmass.

My justifications for covering such a broad sweep of time and space go beyond the search for context or perspective, or the desire to understand the growth of the forest, not just the trees. These are important considerations which I take seriously, but I also have two specific goals in the study that require a history that is both wide and deep. The first is my interest in explaining why the royal hunt became so homogenous across the continent, why certain elements of this complex traveled so far, why courts and cultures with little direct knowledge of one another nonetheless shared a similar hunting style. In short, how can we account for the appearance of “international” standards and styles under premodern conditions of communication? My second goal is to understand why this institution lasted for so long, nearly four millennia. The search for the reasons underlying its extreme longevity leads, naturally, to a consideration of Braudel’s notion of “la longue durée.” Both issues will be addressed at length in the concluding chapter.

Given the subject matter of this study, it seems advisable to offer the following disclaimer: I am not advancing another grand theory on the decisive role of hunting in human social-cultural evolution. Such a disclaimer is necessary because hunting has often been cast as the engine that drove hominid history. In

its extreme form the “hunting hypothesis” asserts that big game hunting explains the basics of early hominid biological, behavioral, and cultural development, that hunting made us truly human. This theory has been justly criticized on a number of grounds. One major line of attack is that early hominid communities were not just hunters but foragers and scavengers engaged in the extraction of a broad range of natural resources. Hunting, therefore, was hardly the predominant element, the source of change; rather it was part of a much larger package of technical, social, and ecological adjustments. Second, the theory’s critics have argued that, while less than heroic, scavenging and foraging still require group cohesion, cooperation, and knowledge of nature, all of which encouraged the elaboration of more sophisticated social and communication skills.<sup>54</sup>

These reservations concerning the supposed centrality of hunting in prehistory apply with even greater force to the historic period. The written record affirms, I believe, that the chase was never a dominating factor, never an engine; this record does show, however, that the hunt was fully integrated into the political and cultural life of many of the peoples of premodern Eurasia. Because of this integration, the royal hunt provides a useful window on the past, one that allows exploration of the manifold linkages between nature, culture, and politics, and, at the same time, provides a window that exposes something of the extensive historical connections among the peoples of the Old World.

The royal hunt lends itself to these ends by virtue of its multiple faces and diverse functions, that is, its plasticity, a property which it shares with other types of hunting. As I will try to show, the chase was an ingredient in interstate relations, military preparations, domestic administration, communications networks, and in the search for political legitimacy. But the importance of the royal hunt hardly ends here. It was also closely tied to an issue of critical importance to all societies, that of access to, and preservation of, natural resources. Of equal concern to environmental history, elite hunting was a medium through which images of nature were fashioned and projected, as well as a medium through which actual bits and pieces of living nature were disseminated, sometimes far beyond their home range.

At this time, I can only offer a preliminary reconnaissance of a vast and complex topic. Many individual monographs could and should be written about the royal hunt in particular times and places. Unfortunately, investigations placing elite hunting in its appropriate natural and cultural settings are comparatively rare. This accounts, to some extent, for the uneven coverage of this book. I am painfully aware that important areas such as Korea, Japan, Central Europe, and the Ottoman empire deserve more attention than I could give them. Consequently, new and detailed case studies, once available, will doubtless challenge, modify, and improve upon my findings and portrayals. But if I am not completely

off the mark, then perhaps the data and arguments presented here might engender productive revisionism that yields new knowledge, new insights, and new, improved hunting histories. Someday, perhaps, it might even be possible to contemplate a truly planetary perspective that identifies long-term developments across the globe, comparing the relationship between the pursuit of protein and the pursuit of power in the hunting histories of sub-Saharan Africa, pre-Columbian America, Oceania, and Eurasia.

As point of departure for this particular hunting history, we need to answer some very basic questions about elite hunting. Who hunted? Where did they hunt? How frequently did they hunt? How and what did they hunt? Only then can we tackle the central question: why did they hunt?



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